

PLATO
ON SOUL AND
AGENCY

Karel Thein

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Plato on Soul and Agency

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By

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TO DANIELA, DANIEL, MIA
without whom not



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Introduction

No Platonic motif enjoys such a variety of presentations as the soul. In fact, the more we read and reread the dialogues, the more we suspect that this diversity may well elude a narrow definitional grasp. Of course, the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws* define the soul as that which moves itself, and I will briefly turn to this definition below. However, this definition does not account for what exactly the soul does while moving itself. Such an account never takes a unified form, which is also why later definitions of the Platonic soul will tend to enumerate rather than synthesize its capacities. Yet conjointly, all of the soul's activities hold the world together. Rather than being one part of this world, the soul is the linchpin that sustains and animates the world's entire structure. This is obviously true of the world soul, as has been emphasized many times. But the same thing is no less true of the individual souls that are the focus of this book. To capture the range of their actions and passions, the dialogues must rely on descriptions and stories that weave together the soul's ethical, epistemic, biological, and cosmic functions. These descriptions are subject to widely diverging interpretations, not in the least because they refuse to be reduced to formal and rigorous argumentation. For this reason, some readers, starting with Aristotle, took exception to Plato's style of talking about the soul. Others, however, read it as expressing fundamental insights and implying that, as Myles Burnyeat put it in his discussion of the soul's tripartition, "some truths are too important to stand or fall by mere argument."¹

Still, to bring order to the truths about the soul that Plato advances in the most varied contexts and often using images is an important, if arduous, task. To supplement the ongoing efforts in this area, this book focuses on two facets of the main ambiguity in Plato's presentation of the soul: sometimes, the latter is introduced as almost a person; at other times, it plays the role of a principle that is indispensable for Plato's cosmology (chapter by chapter, it will become clear that this distinction comes close to, but does not entirely overlap with, the one between a moral and a physical agent). On the view that I will elaborate, the oscillation between these two perspectives reveals something important about the nature and limits of philosophy

1 Burnyeat 2006, 1.

as a human activity. Transcending narrow epistemic matters, Plato's multifaceted approach to the soul invites us to recognize both the limits to our knowledge and the need to transcend them by hypothesizing principles that are beyond any empirical verification. This is all the more true because of the soul's crucial role in the broadest range of topics, all of which are connected through its motion. And if this diversity relies on self-motion, the latter is a basic feature but again not an explanation of the full extent of the soul's roles, which reach from biology to the intellectual operations, which Plato, in sharp contrast to Aristotle, also understands as motions. This is also why Plato can situate even the intellect into different environments and describe the afterlife as a full life with all its sensual richness.² In this context, Plato uses the soul as our guide to the humanly inaccessible regions of the universe. Souls are literally everywhere, doing everything.

To put it simply, a striking but perhaps unsurprising feature of the dialogues is thus the absence of a unified account of the soul that would go beyond the formal definition in terms of self-motion. That the *logos* of the soul consists in its self-motion is clearly stated in *Phaedrus* 245e4–5 and *Laws* x, 895e10–896a2, and both texts also identify the self-moving soul as the source of all motion. Importantly, they also associate the soul's self-moving character with its capacity to animate bodies (*Phaedrus* 246c4–5, *Laws* x, 895c11–12). However, as crucial as this association is, these two features of the soul are juxtaposed rather than reworked into a richer, more unified definition. In the dialogues, the capacity to animate is not described as what gives us the *logos* of the soul, although it is arguably its most general activity, and later authors tend to perpetuate its juxtaposition with self-motion.³ This strategy is clear in an early concise attempt to define the soul without a larger dialogical context. This attempt, which occurs in the Pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*, is typically twofold: “that which moves itself;

2 That said, I do not quite agree with Brisson 2023, 101, who asserts that since the soul is neither a sensible particular nor a Form, “only one type of discourse can be held about it, which cannot be declared true or false, and this type of discourse is myth.” I feel closer to the ensuing claim that “the soul cannot, moreover, be reduced to a process or an activity; it is an autonomous entity that has a personality and a history.” However, I find it crucial that the soul can only have “personality and history” because it *does* something.

3 I leave aside the fragments of Speusippus and Xenocrates whose concept of the soul arises, as far as we know, from the exegesis of *Timaeus* 35a–b. These fragments relate mostly to the world soul and are difficult to connect to the individual soul's agency as discussed in this book. For the fragments of Speusippus, see Isnardi Parente 1980 and Tarán 1981; for Xenocrates, see Isnardi Parente 2012. Cf. also Opsomer 2020 and Palmieri 2022.

the cause of vital processes in living creatures" (ψυχὴ τὸ αὐτὸ κινεῖν αἰτία κινήσεως ζωτικῆς ζώων, 411c7).⁴ While the second part of this definition combines passages from several dialogues, including the *Phaedo*, the first part refers directly to the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*. What is lost here is naturally the context. The *Phaedrus*, for example, introduces the self-moving soul to lend support to the statement that "all soul is immortal" – a statement that forms the starting point (ἀρχή) of a demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) that divine madness is beneficial (245b7–c7). I mention this argumentative complexity (on which see more in Chapter 3.4) simply to point out that Plato's claims about the soul tend to be highly context-sensitive, and any subsequent attempt to summarize his teaching about the soul, let alone an effort to define it, must overcome the ambiguities and gaps inherent in the dialogues themselves. This is the case with the standard and perfectly acceptable definitions of the Platonic soul that we find, for example, in Pseudo-Galen's *Medical Definitions* or Alcinous' *Handbook of Platonism* (I will quote both in Chapter 3.1).

Notwithstanding the lack of a rich yet unified definition of the soul, the above-mentioned passage from the *Phaedrus* contains a succinct formulation that sums up the aim of this book: we must, says Socrates, "understand the truth about the nature of the soul, divine or human, by examining what it does and what is done to it" (245c2–4).⁵ Turning our attention to the *pathē te kai erga* of the soul is a broader task than expanding on its definition, and it is this task that this book attempts to fulfill in its own limited way. First, it must be said that I will leave aside the divine souls and the world soul; the focus will be on the reincarnating, individual souls. Second, it must be repeated that I will not deal with most of the topics usually associated with Plato's talk about the soul insofar as these topics fall under the well-established rubrics of epistemology, ethics, or biology.⁶ Instead, I will

4 If not stated otherwise, I quote Plato (or Pseudo-Plato) from Cooper 1997. I occasionally modify the translation. For the text and line numbers of the dialogues I refer to the Burnet OCT editions.

5 In the same vein, *Republic* 1, 353d3–7, instead of a definition, offers a partial inventory of "functions" (ἔργα) of the soul that nothing else can perform: "for example, taking care of things, ruling, deliberating, and the like." Clearly, all functions or deeds presuppose the soul's agency. I will briefly return to this passage in Chapter 5.2, with an emphasis on its political orientation.

6 This is not to deny the fundamental importance of, especially, the ethical horizon, which is clearly implied in the epistemology of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* or in the biology of the *Timaeus*. But, in relation to the modern and ethically indispensable notion of "agents who reason about and act (or fail to act) on various practical norms" (Shoemaker 2013, 2),

raise some questions about the soul's specific *agency* as ineliminable from the Platonic picture of the universe. This scope does not imply a general focus on cosmological issues, but the canvas of the whole universe, so to speak, will remain in the background even when the texts under consideration turn to the soul entangled in human affairs.

To capture these different layers, I treat the issues raised in the dialogues thematically rather than developmentally. This is not to emulate the ancient readers, but to acknowledge that, without a time machine, we can only speculate about the order of composition of the dialogues, although brilliant people have taken many educated (and computer-generated) guesses. Fortunately, I believe that the main topic of this book supports the thematic approach across different dialogues. In fact, Plato is consistent about the soul as the central agent responsible for both vital and intellectual functions. While there are obvious differences between the dialogues concerning, for example, the presence or absence of the soul's internal division, these differences do not map neatly onto any of the developmental schemes. It seems more fruitful, therefore, to approach this diversity from a thematic, context-sensitive angle that pays attention to the main issue discussed in a given dialogue.

In the different contexts of different dialogues, I will therefore look for Plato's views on the soul's agency, the understanding of which seems to be rather constant throughout the various presentations of the soul despite their thematic and stylistic diversity. At the same time, this diversity is naturally one of the reasons for the endless but legitimate discussions about the soul's natural simplicity or complexity, including the issue of the soul's tripartition. I do not intend to add to these discussions, but it is important to point out that it is precisely the treatment of tripartition that confirms Plato's willingness to experiment with a large inventory of options for what the soul might properly be and what it is supposed to do. Probably not coincidentally, the tripartition is introduced only in those dialogues that also deal with the soul's immortality, and then the view on the latter affects how we understand the former. In this regard, Plato uses two strikingly different schemes: either the soul has three immortal parts or only one of its parts survives our death. In their contexts, these options are presented either by means of an image (the *Phaedrus*), in the framework of a larger image (the *Timaeus*), or at least with the help of an image (the *Republic*). It is clear, and

the scope of the soul's agency in Plato is broader, not in the least because it includes matters of cosmology.

it is quite explicit, that the truth about the soul requires a clarity different from that which Plato lends to our unambiguous grasp of the unchanging objects of knowledge.

Of course, the tripartition's inherent connection to the issue of the image makes us wonder which side of the complexity belongs to the soul and which belongs to the image, and whether we can tell them apart. But this connection contains yet another lesson that is important for my main theme: no matter how the soul is presented in a given dialogue, and whether it is described as simple or complex, there is always at least one part of the soul that retains the capacity to operate as a causal *agent* distinct from a causal *force*. I borrow this distinction from Luca Ferrero's Introduction to the recent *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Agency*. Causal forces can account for those events that merely happen: "seemingly, these events have no point and they aren't anybody's doing." In contrast, other events are clearly "done by someone or something, with some kind of point or purpose."⁷ This second, no doubt very broad class of events requires explanation that brings in some agency: an explanation that need not be teleological through and through, but takes into account the directedness or, at least, some minimal degree of purposiveness – even a game I play only to enjoy myself is purposive in this elementary sense; it does not *merely* happen.

Even on this most basic account, the soul, as variously described by Plato, is not simply a causal force but a causal agent. The strength of this distinction as applied to Platonic souls will become apparent in Chapter 2, since the *Phaedo* contrasts the agency of these souls not only with the differently understood souls of the Presocratics but also with the causation of the Forms. The agency of individual Platonic souls will then appear as the capacity to cause real change in the world of bodies independently of the

7 Ferrero 2022, 1. For a broader treatment of the concepts of action and passion in Plato, see Macé 2006. Neither White 1985 nor Bobzien 2021 includes Plato in their treatments of agency and responsibility in ancient philosophy. Also, they do not offer any precise definition of agency (which is rather surprising in White, whereas Bobzien's main interest lies elsewhere). I must leave aside the very detailed and technical questions of agency and causation discussed in contemporary philosophy and science, including the question of how this term applies beyond human agency. Indeed, contemporary philosophy broadens the scope of agents by discussing the possible agency of inanimate things including artefacts. For an overview of this issue, see, e.g., Knappett and Malafouris 2008. On non-human agency, see also Postclassicism Collective 2020, 47–64, which relies quite heavily on the object-oriented ontology. On the latter and agency, see Baranovas 2020, who offers a complementary account.

causal force of both these bodies and the incorporeal Forms. There is no doubt that souls can convey to bodies some properties that depend on, or are explained by, the Forms, but their agency is not derived from the latter. For this reason, it can be said that, in the dialogues, only the soul is endowed with “full-blooded agency”: another term I borrow from contemporary discussions and whose main characteristics are the structural complexity of the agent’s pursuits, its privileged epistemic position, its important relations to other agents of the same kind, its capacity to be responsible for its actions, and its role in underpinning a legal and moral personhood.⁸ I leave aside current debates about the social dimension of agency in offering this simplified list, but it should be emphasized that, even in Plato, where the soul has greater autonomy than a human being and is sometimes even described as the only true source of human agency, no soul acts entirely alone, in isolation from other souls. While much of this book will take into account the specific context of the soul’s everlasting life and its cosmic rather than social agency, the togetherness of souls will nevertheless not be absent from the resulting picture.⁹

If, therefore, Platonic souls so often appear as persons of their own kind, it is precisely because they *do* fulfill a number of criteria for personhood that seem quite natural to a modern reader. Still, for such a reader, the overall picture may be one of simultaneous familiarity and strangeness. On the one hand, Plato ascribes to souls what we would spontaneously ascribe to humans without any further division. On a closer look, however, the first possible complication follows: souls are both *part* of us and the true “us” or ourselves. But, on the other hand, Plato also describes the souls as acting in the world truly on their own, without any apparent connection to human existence. Hence the second complication: the dialogues contain a theater of souls that is unparalleled in the history of philosophy. It is important to make sense of this second complication without losing sight of the first, since the relatively short periods of time that the soul passes as “our” soul are usually presented as decisive for the way the soul spends the large

8 See Ferrero 2022, 7. For a wide-ranging discussion of agent-related actions as distinct from what merely happens, see Shepherd 2021. On soul, personhood and personification in Plato, see, at least, McCabe 1994, 263–300, Gerson 2003, Long 2005, Kamtekar 2006, Sorabji 2006, 115–153, Reeve 2013. For more on souls and persons, see Chapter 5.4 and Conclusion.

9 For a complementary inquiry into Plato’s understanding of human agency connected with virtue and its social importance, see Moore 2023, 185–256. On human agency and moral psychology in Plato, see also Kamtekar 2017.

majority of its time when it is not incarnated (it is rarely remarked that only the *Phaedrus* reverses this perspective insofar as the soul's celestial achievement determines its incarnation; elsewhere, the so-called afterlife is shaped as a reward or punishment for things done "down here"). In all its Platonic versions, this interplay between the two basic forms of the soul's existence – being incarnate in a terrestrial body and being free of such a body – holds the key to the economy of the whole universe (see, especially, Chapter 4). In this respect, Plato's world truly has the agency of souls at its center.

It is also clear that the emphasis on the role of individual souls in the universe connects the issues discussed in this book to the question of Plato's theology. The latter has been much studied, and we can agree that, at least in some dialogues, the divine activity frames the universe and plays an important role on more than one level.¹⁰ My focus, however, will be on the reincarnating souls as co-responsible for the inner structure and diversity of the world. This question is large enough in itself, although the connection between the divine agency and the agency of the reincarnating souls can certainly be made, especially from an ethical point of view where the divine agency can, in the context of human life, offer a valid ethical model to emulate.¹¹ What underlies this possibility is precisely the view that the true causation is person-like. I will defend this view not by revisiting the passages that fully describe or more succinctly evoke a craft-like agency as the maker of our universe, but by rereading the *Phaedo* where the agency of the soul can be measured up against both Socrates' criticism of material causation and his own "new *aitia*", namely the Forms.

Approaching the *Phaedo* from this angle, Chapter 2 has a narrower focus than the more broadly conceived Chapters 3 and 4. Its main aim is to show how exactly the soul is an agent in the specific sense of a cause of events both within and between bodies, a cause that cannot be explained in terms of the constitution of these bodies. In this respect, the chapter prepares the subsequent demonstration (in Chapter 3) that the neat distinction of the soul from all bodies composed of the four elements need not exclude some other (albeit elusive) materiality proper to the soul as agent. At the same time, by revisiting the nexus between the soul's immortality, causation, and agency, the chapter's final section also offers preliminary remarks on the transmigration of souls and its cosmological role (remarks developed in Chapter 4). In addition to these anticipations, the chapter emphasizes the

10 For a detailed argument that Platonic divinities are not reducible to metaphysical principles, see Van Riel 2013.

11 See, e.g., Annas 1999, 52–71, Sedley 1999, Armstrong 2004, Sedley 2017.

distinction between causal agent and causal force, especially with regard to the contrast between the soul and the material compounds, but also between the soul and the Forms on the other hand. The chapter thus covers the terrain of the dialogue's evolving engagement with both the soul and the Forms.

It is important to follow this development because the *Phaedo* uniquely encapsulates the history of philosophy in Socrates' account of his own philosophical progress.¹² And if the explicit part of this account focuses on Socrates' motivation for introducing the Forms as immaterial, unambiguous causes that supplement the missing overall explanation of the cause of "all generation and destruction", the dialogue also sketches and criticizes several conceptions of the soul. The chapter pays close attention to the rejection of the soul as *harmonia* and to the image of the soul as a weaver, showing that their difference can be connected to different views on the soul's individual agency. The latter is foregrounded in the image of the soul as a weaver, and it is this image that opens the way to the dialogue's last argument, which ties together the issue of the soul's immortality and the question of causes. In contrast to the dialogue's first argument, where souls belong to the *generally* described process of generation and destruction (this connection will be analyzed in Chapter 4), the end of the *Phaedo* shows the souls to be *individual* causes that bring life to bodies. This is a significant shift that the chapter reassesses by focusing on what exactly we learn, in Socrates' complex final argument, about the soul that is immortal but never described as "what is" (ὅ ἐστιν) on a par with *ousia* or Form. Instead, even in the *Phaedo*, the soul is presented through what it does and what it suffers. In this perspective, the chapter concludes that the soul's individual agency is not reducible to the soul's causal role in animating the body and that, even in the *Phaedo*, it fulfills the criteria of being a true cause that is free of certain ambiguities that even Socrates' Forms as causes still retain.

The reappraisal of the soul in the *Phaedo* anticipates Chapters 3 and 4, whose progress can be likened to spreading circles. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at the issue of the incorporeality of the soul. Along with the soul's immortality and its self-moving nature, incorporeality is one of the characteristics listed in later Platonic accounts of the soul. Plato himself, however, is

12 See Davis 1980. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates summarized only one part of this history, leaving out the Eleatic side, which becomes prominent in the *Parmenides* and also the *Sophist*. Remarkably, Socrates' two most developed presentations of his new hypothesis of Forms, one in the *Phaedo*, the other in the *Parmenides*, occur directly against the background of his encounter with the thought of his predecessors.

surprisingly cautious in this respect, and, as the chapter demonstrates, he never ventures to define the soul, whether human or not, as being entirely without a body of any kind. The chapter does not contest the obvious fact that Plato treats souls as essentially distinct from visible and tangible bodies, but it tries to understand why the assumption of incorporeality is not discussed in detail in its own right. One possible answer is that to offer a theoretically rigorous discussion of incorporeality is less important to Plato than to emphasize the variety of actions and experiences ascribed to the soul both here and in the afterlife. While these actions and experiences have a crucial moral dimension that relates to the soul's activity of thinking, they contribute to the account of the soul as an individual agent, whose description legitimately borrows certain features of personhood. In order to emphasize the immortality of this agent, it is more opportune for Plato to start from various facets of the soul's self-motion, which locates the soul in respect of the material universe, rather than to develop possible arguments in favor of the soul's full ontological bodilessness. The chapter looks at all the relevant dialogues (the *Phaedo*, *Republic* x, the *Phaedrus*, the *Timaeus*, and *Laws* x, with a shorter discussion of the *Sophist*) and offers a detailed reassessment of the extent to which the soul's natural agency can be approached separately from its explicit ontology.

If Chapter 3 treats the soul as an agent endowed with a certain ontological neutrality, Chapter 4 seeks to further elucidate the role of individual souls in the broader context of Plato's cosmology. The inventory of dialogues remains roughly the same as in Chapter 3, but the choice of particular passages and the perspective from which I examine them are different. In the absence of any previous truly systematic study of the cosmological role of individual souls in the dialogues, this chapter discusses two closely related facets of transmigration: the way in which the lives of souls sustain the physical structure of the universe and, correlatively, the way in which the various reincarnations of the soul ensure the plurality of mortal species as an integral part of that structure. Simply put, the chapter revisits the agency of countless souls as an important pillar of the world's animal ecosystem. In this respect, Plato's discussion of transmigration goes beyond human moral concerns. Cosmic-centered morality is, of course, most explicit in the *Timaeus*, but the chapter reminds us that a certain tension between the goodness of the universe and the good desired by individual human beings is also present in other dialogues. Typically, each of the relevant dialogues discusses this issue from a different perspective, but it is safe to conclude that, unlike the ethically motivated insistence on the immortality of the soul, transmigration as such does not play a major ethical role

independent of cosmology. This only confirms that the talk of transmigration addresses the diversity of animal life forms from the point of view of the universe without contradicting the intellectually and therefore ethically established hierarchy of living species. This conclusion holds regardless of the differences of opinion as to whether it is the individual soul as a whole or only its intellectual part that undergoes the series of reincarnations. Even if the soul's tripartition retains its controversial status, it is ultimately the weak or strong exercise of the intellect that determines, in every human and animal life, the shape of the soul's contribution to the balance of the universe. The conclusion of Chapter 4 thus enriches the main theme of this book: in the dialogues, the general talk of the soul as a principle of life is constantly supplemented by the consideration of the diversity of individual souls, which differ in virtue of their success or failure in acting as "full-blooded" agents.

The motivation for including Chapter 5 is simple: given the repeated insistence, in previous chapters, on the soul as agent, it seems important to offer a reassessment of this agency in light of the soul's complexity. It is a truism to say that Plato projects this complexity into some richly textured images of the soul – and it is certain that, of these images, it is the one offered in the *Phaedrus* that has attracted the most attention. I discuss this image in Chapter 3.3, focusing on the issue of the soul's incorporeality (and of the latter's limits), without entirely neglecting the issue of internal complexity and its relation to the soul's motion. Chapter 5 therefore turns to another, structurally even more complex image of the soul that Socrates presents as a well-crafted verbal sculpture in *Republic* IX. This image is the most developed visualization of the soul's tripartition but also a qualification of it, and, as such, it will invite us to rethink tripartition as an explanatory strategy that plays a crucial role in the *Republic*. In contrast to the image of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, *Republic* IX avoids the broad cosmological context and limits the scope of the image to the case of a not only embodied but explicitly human soul. This shift leads to a more detailed account of the soul's internal structure in terms of the power relations between its parts, a perspective that is echoed in *Republic* X and clearly implies that these parts are endowed with multiple agendas, if not true agencies, of their own.¹³

13 This is an issue raised, for instance, in Brown 2012. I will offer my own comments especially in Chapter 5.4.

On the reading that I will defend, the image of different forces at work in the soul reminds us of the difficulty of striking the right balance between reflective self-knowledge and practical agency. It is evident that being an agent does not mean being transparent to oneself. Indeed, if Socrates, in the *Phaedrus*, depicts the soul as agent par excellence (in fact, the only true agent), he does so against the background of the avowed lack of self-knowledge. Generally, agency runs deeper than knowledge, which is the source of unavoidable problems that follow from acting in a state of ignorance or, even, internal conflict. Especially when Plato leaves behind the cosmological context and turns to the political element, his images often portray the soul as a battleground where different agents compete for supremacy, yet its complexity still invites us to identify, both logically and imaginatively, our human self with the intellect. In this respect, the final chapter of the book echoes several issues discussed in the second chapter and its reading of the *Phaedo*. The images of the soul may dramatize our inability to simply grasp what the soul is, but this situation does not preclude the proper human and philosophical use of the soul's capacity to act on its own. The book's Conclusion will offer a final assessment of this capacity, including some additional remarks on the question of agency.

Souls in the *Phaedo*: Preconditions of Agency

1 Souls as Individuals: Beyond Purity

Unlike some of his predecessors, Plato does not see living species as evolved mixtures of stuff but recognizes them as stable, irreducible parts of reality. In a metaphysical context, namely in the *Timaeus*, these species are part of the structure of the world and are necessary for the world to be complete. For Plato, this situation echoes even in our everyday mental inventory. This is why, when Socrates questions Meno about the unity of virtue, he can use an animal species as a meaningful comparison:

I seem to have met with a great piece of good fortune, Meno, if in seeking one virtue I have discovered that you have a whole swarm of virtues at your disposal. But, Meno, with regard to this image of ‘swarms’, suppose I asked you about just what it is to be a bee (μελίττης περὶ οὐσίας ὅτι ποτ’ ἐστίν), and you said that there were many kinds of bees. What answer would you give me if I asked you: “Do you say that it is their being bees (τῷ μελίττας εἶναι) that makes them of many different kinds? Or do they not differ at all because of this, but because of something else, such as beauty or largeness or something else of that kind?” Tell me, how would you answer if you were asked this question?¹

Meno 72a7–b7

To which Meno replies without a hint of hesitation: “in so far as they are bees, one bee doesn’t differ at all from another” (οὐδὲν διαφέρουσιν, ἥ μέλιτται εἰσίν, ἢ ἑτέρα τῆς ἑτέρας, 72b8–9). Although it will not lead to similarly clear answers concerning the more abstract issue of virtue and its unity, this exchange is rather momentous. Meno has no doubt that he can say of the bees, in Socrates’ words, “what it is that makes them all no different, but the same” (72c1–3). Socrates does not question this confidence, and, from an epistemological point of view, bees are apparently on a par with the fingers

¹ I quote the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* from Sedley and Long 2011, with occasional modifications. Other quotations of Plato are from Cooper 1997.

that Socrates uses as an example of non-problematic unities of the same kind in *Republic* VII: "It's apparent that each [finger on my hand] is equally a finger," regardless of whether it "is dark or pale, thick or thin, or anything else of that sort, for in all these cases, an ordinary soul isn't compelled to ask the understanding what a finger is, since sight doesn't suggest to it that a finger is at the same time the opposite of a finger" (523c11–d6).

As with the bees in the *Meno*, this simple situation receives no further attention since it is only a prelude to the puzzle about the source of the fingers' properties that not only have their contrary properties but occur in a wide variety of things regardless of their nature. Being large and small, beautiful and ugly, thin and thick, pale and dark, are clearly qualities that are present in bees and fingers alike, and so they cannot help us to answer the question "what is a bee?" or "what is a finger?" – just as the answer to *these* questions contains no answer to the questions about, for instance, Largeness and Smallness. As both the *Meno* and the *Republic* suggest, in relation to the puzzles about these opposite properties, the recognition of bees or fingers is uncontroversial, if not outright trivial. As Socrates puts it, every "common soul" does it spontaneously and easily.

Let us leave aside the fingers and the fact that they are a more complex example than intended since a finger is itself a part of a hand and then of the whole that is a human body; also, other species have fingers too. But Socrates' main point about fingers in *Republic* VII is clear, all the more so since the reference to three fingers of different sizes in this text is exactly parallel to the case of three humans in the *Phaedo*: Socrates, Simmias, and Phaedo are indisputably human, and their obvious differences in size lead to the puzzle of Largeness and Smallness as such (102b–d). From these examples, like from the *Meno*, we can conclude that, for Plato, sensible individuals, unlike their properties, are epistemologically trivial. At the same time, however, they are *not* trivial metaphysically. On the contrary, they imply the puzzle of the world's composition. A human being, a deer, or a shark are individual members of different species that belong to the structure of the universe and, at least in this respect, are more than different bundles of properties. Moreover, and most importantly for our subject matter, it is metaphysically relevant that these individuals are alive. In the ontology that Plato puts forward, this means that their individuality does not follow from, but is underpinned by, a different sort of individuality, one that is not confined within the boundaries of this or that animal species: the individuality of the soul.

In the resulting picture that will occupy us throughout this book, it is rather easy to say what the souls share with sensible living beings such as

bees: regardless of their opposite properties (such as vices or virtues), “one soul is neither more nor less soul than another one” (μηδὲν μάλλον μηδ’ ἥττον ἑτέραν ἑτέρας ψυχὴν ψυχῆς εἶναι, 93d1–2).² But it is also necessary to emphasize the important difference between a bee and a soul: the latter is a new kind of strong individual that does not affect the ontological status of animal species but conditions the life of their individual members. Quite obviously, individual souls maintain their identity across the whole scale of animal life-forms. This book is intended to convey an astonishment at this simple theorem; notwithstanding its utter difference from anything like Darwinian evolution, we can certainly say that “there is grandeur in this view of life,” a view that implies an infinite and incessant traffic of souls in every corner of the universe. No doubt there are predecessors to this picture of life at large, with Empedocles and Pythagoras as the most obvious candidates. However, as far as we can tell, these thinkers need not have granted the soul a true immortality distinct from the soul’s capacity for being wonderfully long-lived yet still perishable.³ My focus will therefore be on Plato alone, who gives the picture new contours and, especially, returns to it time and again from various perspectives that offer us rich material for closer inspection. To approach the individuality of souls as metaphysically indispensable agents different from anything we understand as “animal”, it is clearly appropriate to begin with the text that offers the most detail about the difference not only between the soul and the (even ensouled) body but also between the soul and the bodiless Forms. Unsurprisingly, this text is

2 Or, as Socrates repeats it, “one soul is no more nor less this very thing, soul, than another” (93d12–e1). Section 2 will revisit this statement in its context, one of discussing the soul as *harmonia*.

3 On Empedocles, see Long 2017, Trépanier 2017 and Trépanier 2021; on Pythagoras, see Horky 2021, with further references. Heraclitus, who appears to be the first to invoke the soul’s journey across the universe, retains the model of souls as specific portions of material stuff; see Betegh 2007. On the soul in Heraclitus, see also Nussbaum 1972, Schofield 1991, Betegh 2009. Laks 1993 offers concise remarks on the soul and *noûs* in Anaxagoras that make the contrast with Plato quite clear. Naturally, I cannot discuss the Presocratic conceptions of the soul any further, but it seems safe to say that Plato departs from earlier views by separating the soul (and not only the *noûs*) from any mixture of the four elements, or from any one element in particular. Especially this and the next chapter will bring out the consequences of this shift. In making more explicit the moral dimension of the life of the soul, Plato also follows in the footsteps of poets such as Pindar. On the earlier views of the soul, see, at least, Bremmer 1983 and the more concise account in Seaford 2017. Carter 2019 offers an interesting discussion of the Presocratic souls as criticized by Aristotle.

the *Phaedo*, a dialogue that discusses the soul from an astonishing number of perspectives.

Naturally, I will not attempt to discuss all these perspectives, especially since some of them will be addressed in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3.1 will pay close attention to the affinity argument, which is crucial to the question of the soul and incorporeality, and Chapter 4.1 will revisit the cyclical argument, which relates to Plato's views on the transmigration of souls. I will refrain from discussing these arguments here and concentrate instead on the later part of the dialogue, which develops out of the concern, expressed by Simmias on his own and Cebes' behalf at 85b10–d9, that Socrates' earlier attempts to prove the immortality of the soul are inadequate. We know that Simmias and Cebes are not worried about exactly the same thing, and that Simmias' worry is the more radical one, namely, that the soul may decompose even earlier than the body when we die. Cebes, on the other hand, acknowledges that our soul may separate from the body at death and outlive the human person, but he worries that the soul's survival may be temporary and that after a period of time the soul will wear out and dissolve.

Both Simmias and Cebes will use an image to explain their thinking – the image of the lyre, strings, and *harmonia*, and the image of a weaver repairing a series of cloaks –, and I will analyze these images and the discussion they provoke in the next section. First, however, I wish to emphasize that Simmias' and Cebes' worries are pivotal since they steer the *Phaedo* in a new direction, which, in due course, will lead to establishing the soul's "essential" immortality, to use David Sedley's apt phrase.⁴ So far, the dialogue has dealt primarily with the question of the soul's separability from the body and the correlative task of its purification, which is achieved through thought, apparently without any significant relation to the soul's other task of animating bodies.⁵ This perspective has clearly prevailed between the affirmation that the soul can achieve, even before we die, an apparently formidable degree of being on its own (cf. *μάλιστα αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτὴν γίγνεται*,

4 Sedley 2009, with a distinction between "essential", "conferred" and "earned" immortality. On the "essential" and "earned" kinds, see a brief remark in Section 4 of this chapter. I will leave aside the "conferred" immortality, which belongs to the divinely constructed souls in the *Timaeus*. On this kind of immortality, see Long 2019, 53.

5 The duality of these tasks in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* will also be noticed in Chapter 3.1–2. And cf. a similar observation in Long 2021, 148: "In the *Phaedo*, the soul has two functions, cognition and animating bodies, and should devote itself to one at the expense of the other." This duality is also commented on in Broadie 2001.

65c7), and Socrates' renewed insistence, at 84a–85b, that the philosopher's soul need not fear death, but should see it as an escape from human evils and a journey towards what is akin to the soul's purified state.⁶ In these twenty Stephanus pages, the soul is characterized by its task of approaching the objects of thought that are most akin to the thinking soul's purified state (namely, the Forms, introduced at 65d–66a) and of coming as close as possible to what is divine.⁷

There is no doubt that this task sets the agenda of Platonism in its canonical form, but it must also be recognized that, in this epistemic and moral context, the soul's agency cannot be reduced to escaping the harmful tyranny of bodily desires and accepting the good government of the divine. Since the divine government serves as the model for the souls in their efforts to master and dominate the body (see 80a–b), the purified soul must indeed have the power to act on its own beyond its epistemic activity. This power, however, does not *follow from* the soul's purification; rather, it properly belongs to the soul as such and is present in every soul regardless of its virtuous or wicked state (see, e.g., 94b). At the same time, this power does not in itself testify to the soul's immortality, and it will not be directly related to the task that will be emphasized at the end of Socrates' argument, namely, to bring life to what would otherwise be lifeless.

It is only with this task, and its connection to the soul's "essential" immortality, that the souls end up with a full agency that does not entirely follow from the language of purification, which is also understood as a guide for getting closer and closer to an epistemic and moral ideal: an ideal whose perfection (and indeed strength) retains its supremacy. The above-quoted pivotal moment does, of course, not imply any turning away from this ascetic ideal that remains valid, most importantly, for the philosopher as a human being.⁸ But the worry expressed by Simmias and Cebes points to the possibility that purification, without some other strengthening of the

6 This is especially accentuated in the ascetic reading of the *Phaedo*. On this reading and its variants, see Ebrey 2017, with further references. For a detailed reinterpretation of this issue and the whole dialogue, see Ebrey 2023. Cf. also Corrigan 2023, 11–48.

7 For a recent interpretation of the soul's kinship with the divine in the *Phaedo*, see Ebrey 2021 (now revised and integrated in Ebrey 2023).

8 This is more easily applied to the pursuit of pure knowledge than to the relationship between humans and gods. I cannot discuss here the entangled issue of the divine supremacy over humans and their souls in the *Phaedo* and also in the *Laws*. For a very interesting mention, in the conclusion of Socrates' last argument, of god (θεός) as indestructible in probably the same (or very similar) sense as the Forms (106d5–6), see Section 4 of this chapter.

soul's being, would perhaps not preclude the soul from "wearing thin". This concern is not entirely naïve: even if the soul does not undergo a structural disintegration similar to one of a compound object nor does it suffer organic decay, does this exclude the option of its wearing out through long-term fatigue? The question seems legitimate in that we have not yet been told what the soul, taken in itself, really is. Rather, we have learned a lot about *our* soul and its separation from our human body: about purification as the *task* that the soul *should* accomplish.⁹ However, what ideally belongs to the *human* soul and what always belong to the soul *as such* need not be the same thing, not in the least because the soul's qualities admit of degrees whereas being the soul does not. In this respect, even a successfully accomplished purification of the bodily element – a purification carried out by means of philosophy – need not seem to offer the guarantee of immortality for each and every soul.¹⁰

To illustrate this important point, we can briefly return to Socrates' above-quoted claim about the soul and its being "most by itself". This claim concerns the philosophizing soul, and it epitomizes the ascetic imperative:

And surely the soul reasons best when it is being troubled neither by hearing nor by sight nor by pain, nor by a certain sort of pleasure either, but when it as much as possible comes to be alone by itself (μάλιστα αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτὴν γίγνηται), ignoring the body, and, as far as it can (καθ' ὅσον δύναται), doesn't associate or have contact with the body when reaching out to what is real (τοῦ ὄντος). (65c5–9)

Socrates places the soul on a scale that extends in between "body" and "reality", and invites it to move as far away from the former and as close to the latter as possible. Later, in the affinity argument, Socrates will be more affirmative about the soul's natural affinity or kinship with simple incorporeal reality, but even then, the soul's separation from the body does not turn it into a simple intelligible being (see Chapter 3.1). If, elsewhere in Plato, the

9 Hence the possible relation between purification and what Sedley calls, in a different context, "earned" immortality. For an application of this notion to the *Phaedo*, see Obdrzalek 2021.

10 In other words, following the ascetic reading of the *Phaedo*, we can certainly agree with Ebrey 2017, 15, that "our soul has proper activities and a proper condition. Thought and inquiry are proper activities of the soul." But Simmias and Cebes would perhaps object that the shift from "our soul" to "the soul" must not go unnoticed and that some souls can *fail* as far as "thought and inquiry" are concerned. But, again, failure or not, "one soul is not more and not less a soul than another."

expression “itself by itself” canonically evokes “reality” in the sense of immaterial Forms as objects of thought, in our present context the soul is “itself by itself” insofar as it is separate from the body, just as the body is “itself by itself” when separate from the soul. This is made explicit in Socrates’ earlier definition of death, which uses precisely this language:

Can we believe that [death] is anything other than the separation of the soul from the body? And do we believe that being dead is the following: the body has been separated from the soul and come to be apart, alone by itself (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα), and the soul has been separated from the body and is apart, alone by itself (τὴν ψυχὴν ... αὐτὴν καθ’ αὐτὴν). Can death be anything other than that? (64c4–8)

In this definition, the repeated *auto kath’ hauto* prepares Socrates’ broader effort to draw out the analogy between philosophical purification and death. At the same time, it is used quite neutrally and can be applied to the body as separate from the soul. Indeed, later in the dialogue, Socrates gives the body some sort of identity or persistence in time by pointing out that some corpses, such as Egyptian mummies, remain “almost whole for an unimaginably long time” and that some parts of our bodies, such as bones or sinews, “are still practically immortal” (ὅμως ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀθάνατά ἐστιν) (80c8–d3). “Practically” or “so to speak” immortal is certainly not the same thing as everlasting, but, in the light of such a statement, one understands why Simmias and Cebes wonder about a similar kind of longevity even in the case of the soul, all the more so because they have just witnessed a series of attempts to prove its true immortality and found these attempts unsatisfactory.

In order to convey their concern as vividly as possible, Simmias and then Cebes will offer their own images of the soul as an entity in danger of dissolution. Taken together, their thought-experiments differ from the rest of the *Phaedo* in that they do not present a hypothesis or an argument intended to prove the immortality of the soul. Instead, they illustrate some of the possible pitfalls of such an endeavor.¹¹ Even more importantly, they do so by constantly testing the soul against the body, which only reinforces the need to endow the soul with true agency, which cannot be gained by purification

11 It is Horky 2021, 53–54, who translates εἰκὼν at 87b3 as “thought-experiment”. I find this entirely appropriate, not in the least because the images of the soul discussed in Chapter 5 below are precisely that: thought-experiments that lend a vividness to what is neither accessible by perception nor graspable by formal analysis alone.

alone. In fact, it is by taking this part of the whole discussion seriously that Socrates arrives at a new way of relating the soul to the Forms: instead of making the latter into objects of thought, he will establish a firm connection between the soul and Life, a connection that is entirely independent of epistemic success, or, in other words, of the soul's purification. Our next task, then, is to understand how the images of the soul as *harmonia* and of the soul as a weaver play this pivotal role in the dialogue's progress.

2 Soul as *Harmonia*, Soul as a Weaver

The obvious difference between the discussion of Simmias' and Cebes' worries and the earlier discussion is this: whereas the recollection argument and the affinity argument sought to put as much distance as possible between the soul and the body, the images of the soul as *harmonia* and of the soul as a weaver consider the soul in *interaction* with bodies. This interaction is not seen as harmful per se. Rather, the question is to know whether the soul is truly distinct from the body in a way that would preclude it from perishing after some long period of time that would extend far beyond any single human lifetime. Simmias and Cebes find no support for an affirmative answer to this question, either in Socrates' earlier efforts or in their own philosophical practice. In this latter respect, Simmias' speech may have a doxographic value with regard to the absence of a Pythagorean doctrine of a strong immortality of the soul.¹² No less importantly, it also contains a methodological prelude that anticipates Socrates' later recourse to *logos* in difficult matters where no certainty can be gained from experience – and Socrates will even use a similar image of a sea-voyage to convey the difficulty in question (cf. 85d2–4 and 99d1–2).¹³ These parallels are an invitation to take the following part of the dialogue very seriously.

Simmias, who speaks first, begins by restating the core of the affinity argument. He then applies it more directly or individually than Socrates did to the case of the soul. Importantly, Simmias' speech is divided in two parts, which express two different positions. In the first part, Simmias lends his voice to a hypothetical speaker who is clearly distinct from “us”, who

12 Cf. Horky 2021, 52–54, whose focus, however, is only on the contribution of Cebes.

13 On this anticipation and its expressions, see Gallop 1975, 146–147, and briefly Rowe 1993, 202 (on 85d1). In what follows, I will not attempt a thorough interpretation of Simmias' doubts about immortality, including their well-known impact on Cicero; on this issue, see Long 2019, 100–105.

come to the fore in the second part of the speech. In order to properly evaluate these two perspectives, I will first quote the introductory part of Simmias' speech, which reiterates the general contrast between the perishable and the imperishable, regardless of the issue of the soul. The contrast, which is intended to prepare the criticism of Socrates' previous argument, is as follows:

One might say the same thing about *harmonia* too, and a lyre and strings: that the *harmonia* is something invisible, incorporeal, and utterly beautiful and divine in the tuned lyre (ἀόρατον καὶ ἀσώματον καὶ πάγκαλόν τι καὶ θεῖόν ἐστιν ἐν τῇ ἡρμωσμένη λύρᾳ), whereas the lyre itself and its strings are bodies, corporeal, composite and earthy, and akin to the mortal (σώματά τε καὶ σωματοειδῆ καὶ σύνθετα καὶ γεώδη ἐστὶ καὶ τοῦ θνητοῦ συγγενῆ). So when someone either smashes the lyre or cuts and snaps its strings, what if one were to insist, with the same argument as yours, that the *harmonia* must still exist and not have perished? For there would be no way, when the lyre still exists with its strings snapped, and when the strings themselves, which are of a mortal kind, still exist, that the *harmonia*, which is of the same nature as and akin to the divine and immortal (τὴν τοῦ θείου τε καὶ ἀθανάτου ὁμοφυῆ τε καὶ συγγενῆ), could have perished, and perished before the mortal did. No, he'd say, the *harmonia* itself must still exist somewhere (ἀνάγκη ἔτι που εἶναι αὐτὴν τὴν ἁρμονίαν), and the bits of wood and the strings must rot away before anything happens to the *harmonia*. (85e3–86b5)

Simmias speaks, therefore, hypothetically, on behalf of someone who chooses to amplify rather than exemplify Socrates' affinity argument. The original contrast was between two sets of properties: that which is incomposite and indivisible (78c2–3), impossible to touch and invisible (79a1–4), and overall "pure, always in existence, and immortal, staying in the same condition" (79d1–2) is set by Socrates against that which is composite, tangible, visible, and changing. With *harmonia* on the side of what is permanent, the list of properties must change. "Invisible" and "incorporeal" are retained (the latter now becoming fully explicit), but "incomposite" must be dropped since *harmonia*, as a structure, cannot be simple. Instead, Simmias' hypothetical speaker immediately falls back on "the divine", which Socrates later introduced to his own argument. In Socrates' argument, however, this was a new step designed to empower the soul, to lend it a godlike power that could never be derived from the soul's simplicity and indivisibility. As I have already said, Socrates uses the epithet "divine" to supplement the strictly

epistemic and ontological considerations with the vocabulary of power: what is divine is the natural ruler, and this is the template for the soul's agency insofar as the soul rules the body (see explicitly 79e9–80a5).¹⁴ In contrast, Simmias' hypothetical speaker makes no effort to transfer such a power to the soul as agent. In their version, being divine looks more like an aesthetic quality than the mark of power and agency.

The “divine” plays, therefore, no independent role in the quoted description that is, for the rest, unmistakably yet rather vaguely reminiscent of how Socrates describes the Forms. This resemblance is most evident in the contrast between the *harmonia*, which itself exists “somewhere”, and the *harmonia* “in the tuned lyre”: the latter expression looks very much like the idiom of participation that Socrates will use to talk about Largeness and Smallness “in” Simmias (102b5–6). As such, the *harmonia* “in” the tuned lyre is yet another anticipatory element of the whole passage.

This anticipation is irrelevant, however, when Simmias turns to matters of the soul, leaving aside his hypothetical speaker and speaking for himself and the like-minded persons.¹⁵ The change of perspective is unambiguous since the soul as *harmonia* will emerge from a particular mixture of our elemental qualities and disappear with it:

In actual fact, Socrates, I think that you yourself are well aware that we take the soul to be something of precisely this kind, since our body is made taut, so to speak, and held together by hot, cold, dry, wet and certain other such things, and our soul is a blend and *harmonia* of those very things (κράσιν εἶναι καὶ ἁρμονίαν αὐτῶν τούτων τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν), when they are blended properly and proportionately (καλῶς καὶ μετρίως) with one another. Anyway, if the soul really is a sort of *harmonia*, obviously when our body is loosened or tautened beyond proportion by illnesses or other evils, the soul must perish at once (εὐθύς), however divine it may be (καίπερ οὖσαν θειοτάτην), just like other sorts of *harmonia*, both those consisting in sounds and those in all the products of the craftsmen, whereas each body's remains must last for a

14 For a very general statement to the effect that the soul, in virtue of its seniority, should rule (ἄρχειν) over the body, cf. *Timaeus* 34c4–35a1 and *Laws* x, 896c2–3.

15 Simmias' forthcoming “we” need not refer to a Pythagorean circle that would share some definite view on the immortality (or not) of the soul. Sassi 2016, 454, may well be right in taking this “we” for implying Simmias and Cebes. Rowe 1993, 204–205, comments succinctly on various possibilities, none of which can be chosen with any certainty. For a recent discussion of the Pythagoreans and immortality, see Horky 2021.

long time (πολὺν χρόνον παραμένειν), until they are burned up or rot away. So consider what we'll say in reply to this argument, should someone claim that the soul is a blend of the things in the body (κρᾶσιν οὖσαν τὴν ψυχὴν τῶν ἐν τῷ σώματι), and so is the first thing to perish in what is called "death". (86b5–d3)

In contrast to the earlier dissociation of *harmonia* itself from the lyre, Simmias emphasizes here the dependence of *harmonia* on the proper blend of physical qualities. There are some ambiguities, particularly regarding the modalities of the relation between *harmonia* and *krasis*, but the basic lesson of the passage is clear: no doctrine of the soul as *harmonia* can sustain the view that the soul is immortal in the sense of *individually* surviving the death of a human being.¹⁶ Even the first view, with its introduction of "*harmonia* itself" existing "somewhere", has nothing to offer concerning the main issue under discussion, namely Socrates' hope that souls are immortal as individuals. The only step in this direction, which Simmias does not take, would be to return to the position of the hypothetical speaker and to understand individual souls as harmonious monads, whose continual survival is directly conditioned by their attunement. Formally speaking, such an understanding could be made to anticipate Socrates' "essential participation" in only one of two opposite properties. As a result, a connection between the soul and *harmonia* would be established in the same way that Socrates establishes a connection between the soul and Life. As we will see later, Socrates will preclude such a step by an unexpected – but perhaps traditional – identification of *harmonia* with virtue and its lack with vice, which would preclude the essentially harmonious souls from being *ethically* different: the ultimate objection to taking the soul for *harmonia* will thus be ethical rather than ontological, and it will again relate to the issue of the morally grounded empowerment of the soul (see below on 93c–94e).¹⁷

As such, Simmias' speech has a narrower scope. But apart from the actual question of immortality, it also implies that *harmonia*, understood as the right mixture that holds the body together and keeps it alive, would exhibit

16 I leave aside the question of sources that may be relevant to Simmias' connection between *harmonia* and *krasis*. Parmenides, Empedocles and the Hippocratics come naturally to mind; on Parmenides, Empedocles, and *krasis*, see Sassi 2016. For the possible implications of *krasis*, cf. also Korobili 2023.

17 On the co-presence of a moral and an ontological dualism in the *Phaedo*, see Cornelli 2019, who offers a more general summary of the issue while mainly focusing on the affinity argument.

no activity *over and above* this holding together. To put it in modern terms, Simmias implies that true agency cannot be an emergent property. This issue will gain in importance with Socrates' own criticism of the soul as *harmonia*, which begins at 91c.¹⁸ But since this criticism contains some echoes of Cebes' very different version of the doubt about the previous arguments, we need to look at it first – all the more so since Cebes' intervention will finally steer the dialogue towards Socrates' famous autobiography and then towards a new understanding of the soul, causation, and immortality.

It is Socrates who invites Cebes to present his criticism so that he can answer both his and Simmias' versions and decide whether or not to defend his own previous argument (86d4–e5). Cebes is quick in voicing his doubt about the latter, but he also adds an important point: in contrast to the affinity argument, the recollection argument seems to him valid with regard to the soul's previous existence but still incapable of securing the soul's afterlife (86e6–87a5; and see below on 91e2–92e4). More importantly for the present discussion, Cebes then *disagrees* with Simmias's view “that soul isn't something stronger and longer-lasting than body” (ὥς μὲν οὐκ ἰσχυρότερον καὶ πολυχρονιώτερον ψυχῇ σώματος, 87a5–6). In fact, adds Cebes, “I think it is far superior indeed in all those respects” (δοκεῖ γάρ μοι πᾶσι τούτοις πάνυ πολὺ διαφέρειν, 87a7–8).

Thus formulated, Cebes' belief leaves behind the formal core of Socrates' affinity argument, i.e., the reasoning in terms of simplicity versus composition, but remains consistent with the way Socrates develops his argument by introducing the language of power and strength. At 79e9–80a5, Socrates asks Cebes to compare the soul's superiority over the body to the divine might and rule. Cebes' own language is more restrained, but his use of ἰσχυρότερον (about the “stronger” or “more powerful” soul) and then ἀσθενέστερον (about the “weaker” body, 87a9) points in the same direction. However, and this is where Cebes departs from the previous discussion, even if we agree that the soul is more powerful than the body, and therefore capable of surviving it, longevity is certainly not the same as immortality. Hence the subsequent analysis of the superiority of the soul: an analysis that revolves around the question of whether or not such superiority can

18 The issue of emergentism in relation to the soul as *harmonia* was traced back to Alexander's *De anima* by, e.g., Caston 1997, 347–354, and Shields 2022, 76–81. Another modern way of rephrasing Simmias' position is to speak about the “epiphenomenalist analogy of the soul-body relation to the harmony and strings of a lyre”. I quote this expression from Corrigan 2010, 147, who deals with the reception of our passage in later Platonism and Patristics. On the Stoics, see Salles 2017.

be translated into full-fledged immortality. Cebes' discussion of this issue will be longer and more detailed than Simmias' objection, including the image of the soul as *harmonia*. Even before we look at the exchange between Cebes and Socrates more closely, it should be emphasized that Cebes' argument will determine the whole further course of the dialogue and, by the same token, lay the groundwork for some clarifications concerning the agency of individual souls.¹⁹

From the outset, Cebes assumes what Simmias did not: that the soul has its own activity, independent of the body.²⁰ Before making it explicit in more abstract terms, Cebes projects this assumption into his image (εἰκὼν) of the soul, an image that he invites us to compare with Simmias' image of *harmonia* and the lyre. Unlike Simmias, Cebes constructs his image in two distinct steps, the first of which offers an easily imaginable, anthropomorphic portrayal that remains fully in the visible world. This seems intentional since, once refined, this image will make the soul something easily grasped on its own terms and through its own activity, unlike *harmonia*, which cannot be *depicted* separately from the attuned material. Seen in this light, Cebes' initial image may be crudely anthropomorphic (and initially silent about the soul), but this is precisely what makes it easier to connect with the issue of agency. We can therefore divide Cebes' intervention into the deliberately naïve prelude (87b2–c5), a refined version of the central image (87c5–88a1), and the final expansion of the latter (88a1–b4). I will summarize the prelude, quote the refined version in full, and then analyze Cebes' concluding remarks, which shift from the survival of the soul to the issue of its immortality.

Taken in itself, Cebes' initial εἰκὼν would seem redundant: it does not simply juxtapose a human being and the cloak it wears, but a weaver "who had died in old age" and the cloak he had previously woven for themselves. Since we agree that human beings last longer than the frequently worn cloaks, and since the cloak is not affected by its wearer's death but is still there, we should conclude that the longer-lasting human being is also intact and continues to live, albeit somewhere else. This is strange reasoning, not

19 Without giving too much weight to this fact, we can also point out that the beginning of Cebes' reasoning, at 87a, marks almost exactly the middle of the *Phaedo* as a whole.

20 Rowe 1993, 207, is absolutely right in emphasizing this: "87a1–7 as a whole shows Cebes' position to be much closer to S.'s [sc. Socrates'] than to Simmias'; in particular, he accepts that the soul is an entity in itself, capable of subsisting independently of the body." On the unfolding of the conversation with Simmias and Cebes, and the philosophical ground they share with Socrates, see, e.g., Long 2013, 67–74.

because it fails to distinguish between a human being and a soul (Cebes assumes this difference without making it explicit), but because the belief that humans outlast cloaks does not imply that every human being will outlast every cloak. When Cebes implies that we should interpret the intact cloak as a sign (τεκμήριον) that its wearer is also intact, he offers an invalid inference from the general premise that “humans (τὸ γένος ἀνθρώπου) generally outlast cloaks.” At this point, it makes no difference whether we are talking about the weaver or any other human being, since the invalid conclusion is the same. However, the choice of the weaver begins to make sense when Cebes himself points out that his initial image is misleading and that the real question is to know whether, having survived a number of cloaks, the weaver as the cause of those cloaks might well die in the end. If so, then no single cloak can function as a sign of its maker’s eternal survival.

To appreciate the implications of this conclusion, we need to quote in full the corrected image, or rather the modified conceptual landscape that follows from it:

But in actual fact, Simmias, I think it isn’t like that – for you too should consider what I’m saying. Everyone would protest that that is a simple-minded thing for someone to say; for that weaver of mine wore out and wove for himself many such cloaks, and then perished after the whole lot of them; and this was presumably before the last one, yet a human being is not, for all that, inferior to a cloak or weaker than it (οὐδέν τι μάλλον τούτου ἔνεκα ἀνθρωπός ἐστιν ἱματίου φαυλότερον οὐδ’ ἀσθενέστερον). Soul in its relation to body would, I think, warrant this same image (ταύτην εἰκόνα), and someone who says these same things about them would seem to me to be saying something quite reasonable, that the soul is long-lasting, the body weaker and shorter-lasting (ἡ μὲν ψυχὴ πολυχρόνιον ἐστὶ, τὸ δὲ σῶμα ἀσθενέστερον καὶ ὀλιγοχρονιώτερον). None the less, he’d say, although each soul wears out many bodies (ἐκάστην τῶν ψυχῶν πολλὰ σώματα κατατρίβειν), especially if it lives for many years (because if the body is in flux and perishing when the human being is still alive, the soul still always reweaves what is being worn out), all the same, when the soul perishes it must at that moment have its last piece of weaving and perish before that one alone. And, after the soul perishes (ἀπολομένης δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς), only then does the body show its natural weakness and quickly rot and disappear. And so it is not right as yet to put one’s

trust in this argument and be confident that our soul still exists somewhere after we have died. (87c5–88a1)

The corrected image returns us to a human being composed of a body and a soul. This allows Cebes to develop his image into a neat analogy: the weaver is to the cloak as the soul is to the body. This analogy is much richer than the initial image. Not only does it bring new clarity to the distinction between survival and immortality, but it also insists that, until further proof, the lifespan of a human being and the lifespan of a soul may still differ only in degree. It will be up to Socrates to answer this last challenge, but Cebes shows the direction this answer will have to take by focusing on the causal dimension that he introduces by painting the soul's weaving activity. Here, without appealing to the Forms, we are simply offered an asymmetrical description of the body that is in flux and decomposing, and of the soul as an active cause that opposes this decomposition by constantly maintaining (“reweaving”) the body parts and their vital functions.

Staying on the scale of one human life, the corrected image has a narrower focus than the initial one. The reason is that, in the new version, “many bodies” succeed one another within one human lifetime so that the soul can “wear out many bodies” while we, the humans, may not even notice. Thanks to the soul, we perceive ourselves as having one body, perhaps ailing and often ill, but still somehow self-identical. This apparent identity results from the soul's invisible creation or care. Concurrently, the truth of the body is captured by the doctrine of constant flux, to which Cebes alludes most clearly, including his use of the verb “flow” (ῥέω), which can refer to the Presocratics in general or perhaps more specifically to Heraclitus. The possibility of this reference would be strengthened if we could agree that Heraclitus, together with Empedocles, is to be identified as the inspiration for the whole image of weaving as a body-producing and body-sustaining activity. Unfortunately, the Empedoclean fragment (DK 31 B 126) evokes no such activity, but confines itself to speaking about souls (or *daimones*) being clothed “in an unfamiliar cloak (χιτῶνι) of flesh” – so that the soul or the *daimon* seems to be imprisoned rather than actively creating and recreating its corporeal abode.²¹ As for Heraclitus, the fragment DK 22 B

21 Laks and Most 2016, vol. v, 655, is the source of the translation. Dixsaut 1991, 359 n. 203, takes Empedocles to be Plato's source for Cebes' image, but the similarity is rather limited or, simply, very general. One can add that, without mentioning the *Phaedo*, Aristotle says (1) that the “so-called poems by Orpheus” depict the formation of living bodies as similar to “the weaving of a net” (τῇ τοῦ δικτύου πλοκῇ) (GA II 1, 734a16–20),

67a paints a wonderful image of the soul as a spider that repairs the body as its web, but this image is almost certainly a later imitation.²² Indeed, one wonders whether the later creation of this fragment is not an echo of the *Phaedo*, since the last sentence of the fragment seems to link the image of the weaving spider with the image of the soul as *harmonia* (the twelfth-century Latin text in which Hisdosus Scholasticus conveys the alleged thought of Heraclitus connects the soul to the body *proportionaliter*). This is not to say, of course, that Cebes' image does not belong to the rich history of the topos of "the body as the garment of the soul" (σῶμα χιτῶν ψυχῆς). But, as far as the extant philosophical texts are concerned, it is one of the earliest pieces of this history, and its immediate filiation would be with a broader inventory of culturally significant weaving in poetry and the visual arts, and of course with the role of weaving elsewhere in Plato, including in the *Ti-maeus*, where the demiurge resorts to the language of "weaving" (verb ὑφαίνω, 41d1–2) to describe the activity of attaching the mortal parts of human beings to their immortal intellect.

If, therefore, we read the quoted passage in its Platonic context, it seems significant that Cebes recurs to a craft analogy. And if craft analogies are more common in Plato than in any other ancient author, this is the only time in the *Phaedo* that such an analogy appears precisely at the moment when the soul is tasked with a new activity, that of repairing the body. Until now, the soul's relation to the body has been described either in terms of the ascetic ideal, or by using the language of power and domination. Clearly, the latter option gives the soul's agency more relief, and the artisanal care is a new step in the same direction: the body in flux is still an unruly element, but it needs a closer attention that cannot be fully accounted for by the master-slave model. It is certainly not Cebes' intention to offer an analysis of this new dimension of the soul's use of its active power, but his contribution to the discussion represents a further step in the course of the dialogue towards the final proof of the soul's immortality, a proof that confirms the soul's role in sustaining all mortal life, of which it is not an ultimate but a

and (2) that "the Pythagorean stories" imply that any soul can be "clothed" (verb ἐνδύεσθαι) in any body (*DA* I 3, 407b21). I cannot discuss the tradition of the expression *sōma-chitōn*, on which see, e.g., Gigante 1973 and Beatrice 1985. Scheid and Svenbro 1994 discuss the cultural and also political role of weaving in the Graeco-Roman world (including the reference to our passage at 170). On weaving in different Platonic contexts, see now Petraki 2023.

22 Here I follow Kahn 1979, 288 and 339 n. 433, where Kahn himself follows Marcovich 1966, 26–27, and firmly asserts that, in this text, "both doctrine and imagery come from Chrysippus." The fragment is not included in Laks and Most 2016.

necessary proximate cause. In Cebes' speech, the causal dimension, which will concern us in the next section, does not come to the fore. Its last part, however, not only expands the temporal horizon of the previous lines, but it also mentions, alongside the soul's still uncertain immortality, its equally controversial indestructibility. In Cebes' speech, this mention is quite inconspicuous, but, again, it anticipates the final part of Socrates' last argument: a part that will be important for my understanding of the soul's agency, including its limits.

First, however, comes the temporal extension of the soul's lifespan. At 88a1–b4, Cebes begins by projecting the souls into a series of future incarnations that are made possible by the soul's inherent strength: the soul, he says, "is so tough in nature that it can endure being born many times" (88a6–8). Still, one might believe that, at an unknown future date, the soul will "at the end perish completely (*παντάπασιν ἀπόλλυσθαι*) during one of those [sc. human] deaths" (88a9–10). To exclude this possibility would be to "demonstrate that soul is altogether immortal and imperishable" (*ἀποδείξαι ὅτι ἔστι ψυχὴ παντάπασιν ἀθάνατον τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον*, 88b5–6); in the absence of such a proof, it is legitimate to fear that the soul, after one of its separations from the body, may one day "perish completely" (*παντάπασιν ἀπόληται*, 88b8).

Cebes' repeated insistence on the possibility that the soul will perish "completely" or "altogether" (*παντάπασιν*) does not contradict the image of a strong soul, but the contrast between the soul's two options – strong and repeated survival versus total destruction – does not allow us to decide whether we should imagine the soul as progressively weakening or whether its destruction would be sudden and unexpected. The former option was obviously implied in the previous image of an old weaver, but the latter option can be defended on the basis of the claim that the time of the soul's demise is unknowable. Simply put, from within our human situation, we have no way of knowing how far along our soul is in its life. In fact, we cannot say with certainty that the soul *will* break up and perish: the true tenor of Cebes' speech is skeptical, and commentators rarely notice how close this is to the final question of the dialogue, which concerns the destructibility of the soul.

That Cebes introduces an issue that will be dealt with in the last argument's final part seems supported by a simple lexical consideration: the adjective *ἀνώλεθρον*, "indestructible", is the last addition to the vocabulary of perishing, which appears at 88b6 (and at 95c1, where Socrates quotes Cebes) and reappears at 106a1 to be discussed in terms of its synonymity or not with the adjective *ἀθάνατον* used throughout the dialogue. As we will

see in the final section of this chapter, the answer to this question can be read in two ways, and the possible difference between the soul's mortality and the soul's destructibility should be taken more seriously than is usually the case. Without revealing this chapter's conclusion on this matter, it is safe to say that it has to do with the main novelty of Cebes' image: it implies that the soul has its own agency independent of epistemic and ethical concerns, an agency that Cebes exemplifies by the soul's reweaving of the body in flux. Of course, it is possible to give even this image an ethical spin by insisting on the soul's *care* of the body, but this reading would be at odds with the earlier promotion of the ascetic imperative. Cebes does not openly contradict the latter, mainly because he is simply not interested in it. His focus is on whether the agency of the soul, if we find the right demonstration, might imply that the soul is immortal in the sense of being self-identical throughout an endless series of reincarnations.

Starting with his image of an old weaver, Cebes is thus responsible for reopening the question of person-like agency and self-identity, a question that the affinity argument and Simmias' discourse on *harmonia* left aside. To some extent, the same is true of the recollection argument, which is not invalidated by Socrates' answer to Simmias' and Cebes' concerns. These concerns do not affect the recollection argument, but apart from its inability to guarantee permanent future survival, this argument contains a tension between its emphasis on the individual prenatal experience of each soul and its indifference to the souls' individual stories unfolding in time. This indifference is not an error, since it follows from the necessarily general character of the demonstration, but it is striking that the premise of this demonstration is ultimately empirical in nature: the recollection argument presupposes that each individual soul learns by experience, except that this experience takes place in the prenatal period. The knowledge recollected was gained by acquaintance in a very direct sense, and the argument as a whole can only work if we *deny* the soul the capacity to arrive at the imperceptible objects of thought (the Forms) by abstraction. In this situation, the fact that souls do not remember their histories, but Forms (in the *Phaedo*) and also general theorems (in the *Meno*), reinforces the lack of the soul's stronger self-identity (and agency) in time.

This lack, then, is not due to the logical weakness of the argument, but simply to the fact that the nature of the soul – its capacity to do and to experience certain things – is less important here than the more narrowly conceived pre-existence of the soul. And it is precisely this pre-existence, which makes the soul precede the body it animates, that will enable Socrates to reject the view of the soul as *harmonia*. At 92a6–c3, this rejection is

firm: the soul's pre-existence cannot be reconciled with letting the soul arise from a certain organization of the newly born body. In this respect, Socrates' version of the soul as *harmonia* is clearer, or simply more explicit, especially when he insists that *harmonia* is immanent to the organized material: it is inadmissible, Socrates suggests, "that *harmonia* existed, already composed (πρότερον συγκειμένη), before those things existed of which it was due to be composed (συντεθῆναι)" (92b1–2). Analogically, if the soul were *harmonia*, it would not have existed before the composite human shape (ἀνθρώπου εἶδος, 92b6). In conclusion, the recollection argument and the image of the soul as *harmonia* are emphatically incompatible.²³

Socrates thus clarifies (and indeed rejects) Simmias' hesitant ontology of *harmonia* as (rather vaguely) distinct from the lyre and its material. But this is not his last word on the subject. In the next two pages, Socrates uses the contrast between these two irreconcilable views to add further remarks on the nature of the soul. These remarks may surprise the reader, since they are based on Simmias' admission that not the soul as *harmonia* but only the recollection argument was "a hypothesis worthy of acceptance" (92d6–7).²⁴ Nevertheless, Socrates will set aside the recollection argument and instead use his criticism of the image of *harmonia* to move forward in three related but conceptually distinct steps. First, he confirms that *harmonia* cannot properly govern what is being harmonized or attuned (92e4–93a10). Second, he suggests that *harmonia* admits of degrees and that, for this very reason, a soul really cannot be *harmonia* since, as we already know, being a soul does *not* admit of degrees, but only being *such and such* a soul does (93a11–94b3). Third, he brings together the two previous steps to conclude once again that the soul must not only be different from the body but also have power over it (94b4–95a3).

It is noteworthy that only the second step of this progression brings a truly new claim, namely the explicit statement that every soul is a soul to the same degree, not unlike an Aristotelian substance. I have already commented on this crucial claim (see Section 1 on 93d1–2), but we can add that it is prepared by Simmias' reminder that, in the recollection argument, the

23 In the following paragraphs, my focus is only on the argument as stated in the *Phaedo*. I cannot deal here with the "soul as *harmonia*" tradition, including the much-discussed relation between the *Phaedo* and the Pythagoreans. The bibliography is well summarized in Betegh 2020, 5 n. 8. For a concise treatment of both Plato's argument and the tradition behind it, see also Pelosi 2010, 181–183.

24 On this statement, its context, and Socrates' later use of hypothetical method, see Rowe 1993, 219–220.

accepted hypothesis was that “it is as certain that our soul existed even before it entered a body as that there exists in its own right the being that bears the label ‘what it is’ (ὥσπερ αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία ἔχουσα τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν τὴν τοῦ ‘ὅ ἐστὶν’)” (92d8–e1). In this phrasing, the emphasis is on the *analogy* between the existence of the soul and the existence of the Forms, and neither side of the analogy depends on the other for its existence. This corresponds to the fact that, in the recollection argument, the inference from the Forms was primarily epistemological: it was through the *knowledge* of Forms that the soul’s prenatal existence was demonstrated, but nothing more. Even then, the ontology of the soul was independent of the Forms, and now this independence will be further confirmed.²⁵ The first step in this confirmation is to emphasize that not only *harmonia* is nothing over and above its components but that, by the same token, it cannot “do anything or have anything done to it” (οὐδὲ ποιεῖν τι οὐδέ τι πάσχει) beyond what these components “either do or have done to them” (93a4–5). If so, then *harmonia* “is not the sort of thing to govern (ἡγεῖσθαι) its components, but rather to follow them (ἔπασθαι)” (93a6–7).²⁶

The second step of Socrates’ criticism – which contains the crucial assertion that no soul is less or more soul than any other one – is far more puzzling. But that is because it is meant to be: Socrates wants to demonstrate the confusions that follow if we accept this claim and yet still think that the soul is *harmonia*. At 93a11–94b3, these confusions are amply illustrated, but another assumption is introduced without much discussion, namely that *harmonia*, unlike the soul, is inherently good and can be contrasted with the lack of *harmonia* as its bad opposite. Therefore, for the sake of fallacious argument, Socrates can oscillate between *harmonia* as admitting and not admitting of a degree; he then imputes this confusion in various ways to his imaginary opponents, who are accused of identifying *harmonia* with the soul’s virtue and its lack with the soul’s vice. Socrates implies that in doing so, they do not realize that soul cannot still be defined as *harmonia* if, when vicious, it would lack the latter. In other words, the notional

25 For more on this issue, see Section 4 below and its comments on the soul’s participation in Life.

26 The emphasis on “doing something or having something done to it” is naturally reminiscent of how Socrates characterizes the nature of the soul in *Phaedrus* 245c2–4. For more on this text, see Chapter 3.4. Concerning *harmonia*, cf. also Gee 2020, 252: “Socrates’ conclusion at 94d will be that the soul *can’t* be a harmony, at least in the sense of a mixture of the elements of which it is composed, because it *governs* those elements.”

opponents do not see that they threaten to make the soul's very existence a matter of degree, which is something that must be prevented at all costs.²⁷ On the positive side, this passage clearly reinforces the contrast between *harmonia* as a sort of emergent property and the soul as a truly independent being whose existence does not depend on any of its properties. The turn (or rather the digression) to the opposite goodness and badness of the soul is to be understood from this perspective, and the argument as a whole is meant to confirm, even indirectly, that it would be wrong to try to say what the soul *is* – as opposed to what it *knows* and therefore *does* – on the basis of its opposite properties.²⁸ Socrates clarifies this issue by focusing on the contrast between the good souls and the bad souls, which are souls in the same sense and to the same degree, and he does so in a way that helps him return, in the third step of his criticism, to the soul's capacity for action.

At 94b4–95a3, the third step presents the soul as the dominant part of a human being, the latter being described as a soul-body compound. Socrates does not offer a complex argument here but relies on the common evidence of our ability to oppose in various ways “what belongs to the body” (94b10–c1). In contrast to the reasoning that follows from the formally more rigorous part of the affinity argument, Socrates does not directly compare the soul's command over the body to some divine power, but he does begin by hinting, however subtly, at the possibility that the soul itself has a rational part: “in human beings”, what is in command (verb ἄρχειν) is the soul, “and especially a wise soul” (τε καὶ φρόνιμον) (94b4–5). We can, of course, read φρόνιμον as a wise person (with a reference to 68d–69c), but the lines that follow are strikingly close to the image of the opposite desires that introduces the division of the soul in *Republic* IV (see 94b8–10: “when heat and thirst are there inside, the soul pulls towards the opposite, not drinking, and when hunger is there inside, the soul pulls towards not eating”). Socrates' interest, however, is not in solving the issue of conflicting desires, but in painting a larger picture of how our soul governs our body, which it could

27 On the peculiarities of this reasoning, see Hackforth 1955, 120, and Bostock 1986, 126–127. Cf. also Taylor 1983, 225. Taylor offers a careful discussion of the whole argument, as does Trabattini 2023, 106–124.

28 Or even on the basis of the opposite Forms. Nowhere in the *Phaedo* is the soul's existence derived from the Forms or made dependent on the participation in the latter: not even in the final argument, where Life guarantees the soul's immortality, but does in no way explain why there are souls in the first place. As we will see in the last section of this chapter, the soul is a primitive fact, so to speak.

never do as *harmonia* of our bodily parts. The picture is quite eloquent because, in order to paint its agency in action, Socrates projects the soul in a wide variety of situations that are implicitly but clearly connected to the life in human cities:

Well then, don't we discover that in reality [the soul] does quite the opposite [*sc.* than following the bodily states], directing all [the body's] alleged components, and opposing them almost everywhere through its entire life, and playing the master in every way (καὶ δεσπόζουσα πάντας τρόπους), correcting some of them – those to which gymnastics and medicine are appropriate – more ruthlessly and with certain hardships, but others more gently, some with threats, others with reprimands, conversing (διαλεγομένη) with the desires, rages and fears as if it were one thing and they another? (94c9–d6)

The range that extends from physical hardship to conversing with various desires is again very reminiscent of *Republic* IV and, in both cases, the internal dialogue takes place within each person in a manner similar to the interpersonal conversation. This is confirmed by a quotation from the famous Homeric verses in which Odysseus beats his chest to encourage his heart to endure his next ordeal (*Odyssey* XX, 17–18): verses, says Socrates, in which Homer indicates that he did not take the soul for *harmonia* but, instead, for that which guides and controls bodily affections – which means, adds Socrates, that for Homer the soul was “something far more divine (πολὺ θεϊοτέρου) than befits an *harmonia*” (94e5–6).

In this way, Socrates' reply to Simmias once again leads to a comparison of the soul's dominion over the body with divine power. This is achieved differently than in the affinity argument, but the resulting impression, one that Socrates is clearly willing to create beyond any formal argument, is one of the power of the gods as a paradigm of the soul's agency. This is entirely consistent with the opening part of the dialogue and its insistence on the government of the gods over humans (see 62b–63c). At first, this government was used to initiate the ascetic discourse; now, some thirty Stephanus pages later, this discourse is certainly not denied, but the soul's command, which is its prerequisite, comes into a sharper and more positive focus.

This focus, then, is primarily due to Socrates' reaction to Simmias' image of the soul as *harmonia*. This image is now disqualified, but its rejection leaves intact the image of the soul as a weaver. Socrates himself is very clear on this point when he summarizes how the speech of Cebes amounts to a demand to prove that the soul is “both indestructible and immortal” (95c1),

which does not simply follow from the fact “that the soul is something tough and godlike (ἰσχυρόν τι ἔστιν ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ θεοειδές) and that it existed even before we became human beings” (95c5–6). This only confirms that the godlikeness of the soul consists not only in its (as yet unproven) immortality but also in its power over changeable bodies. At the same time, Socrates agrees with Cebes that the soul’s power over the body is not sufficient to guarantee its eternal survival or the avoidance of “the so-called death” (95d4). To find such a guarantee, we need a new discussion of death, life, and immortality or indestructibility. This shift confirms that the rest of the dialogue is a response to Cebes, whose suggestion provides Socrates with a blueprint on which to build his final effort to demonstrate that our soul never dies.²⁹ However, the initial scope of this effort will be very broad, and it will take time to get back from the “whole cause of generation and corruption” (95e10) to individual souls. In the next section, therefore, I will focus on what is at stake in Socrates’ final argument for our understanding of the soul and its capacity to act and, according to Socrates, its incapacity to die.

3 Causal Puzzles

To answer Cebes, Socrates takes a long detour through his own philosophical career. To analyze this digression and its implications for the subsequent introduction of Forms as causes is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, it will be necessary to offer a view on the main stages of Socrates’ progress, since they all determine the final picture of the soul in relation to life and death. In this regard, the first thing to say is that, paradoxically, Socrates’ autobiography heralds a shift from the first-person perspective on our soul as it negotiates its relationship with our body to a greater emphasis on the third-person perspective and a more general theory of the relationship

29 See the division of the whole dialogue in Bluck 1955, 1x–x, Hackforth 1955, 121–132, and also Gallop 1975, 151, whose summary is worth quoting: “Cebes’ statement of his theory should be compared with Socrates’ restatements of it at 91d and 95b–d. Significantly, it is never refuted in the sequel. Unlike the attunement theory, it is not recanted or denounced as an impostor (92d1–4). Socrates will, indeed, argue that the soul, unlike the weaver, is imperishable. But otherwise he never disputes the theory as a model for understanding the relation between body and soul. Perhaps, therefore, it expresses his own view of the soul’s animating function (cf. 105c9–d5), though it is incompatible with the notion of soul as a ‘prisoner’ in the body.” On 105c9–d5, see Section 4 below.

between soul and life.³⁰ Still, in his account of his experience of philosophy, Socrates oscillates between the two perspectives, repeatedly bringing his own feelings to the fore.

The first of these feelings is his youthful excitement about “research into nature”, with its promise “to know the causes of each thing, why each one comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is” (96a8–9). This is an interesting sentence, which seems to contrast with the earlier insistence on clarifying the “whole cause” of generation and corruption. It is difficult to say whether the contrast is intentional or whether knowing the “whole cause” is meant to entail comprehensive knowledge, which would allow us to grasp the origin and status of “each thing” (perhaps as in the case of the dialectics and the Good in *Republic* VII, 532a–534b). Be that as it may, Socrates’ series of examples conveys his disappointment at having discovered that the inquiry in question amounts to establishing what we can call material causation (see 96b2–d5). Apparently, Socrates attributes to natural philosophy the absence of the “why” question in the sense of giving *reasons* for things being as they are rather than in some other way. But this is not the only problem: some explanations that Socrates encountered suffered from an ambiguity that invalidated their explanatory power. This happens in the cases of addition and subtraction, whether in the case of physical objects or, rather unexpectedly, of numbers, since in both cases the same entity can be understood as the cause of opposite effects. At 96d8–97b3, Socrates offers a rather convoluted description of this difficulty, focusing on acquiring and losing certain properties rather than on coming into or out of existence, but his conclusion is very clear and more general: “I can no longer persuade myself that by using this approach I know why one comes to be (οὐδέ γε δι’ ὅτι ἐν γίγνεται ὡς ἐπίσταμαι, ἔτι πείθω ἑμαυτόν), nor, in short, why anything else comes to be, or perishes, or is” (97b3–6).³¹

Clearly, Socrates is not simply trying to find proximate causes in a series of particular cases, but he hopes to make sense of things in a larger context, including finding out something about himself. In Socrates’ original wonder, natural processes and human reasoning are quite intimately entangled, and it is this interconnection that he will later try to sort out. An important step on this trajectory is his encounter with the teaching of Anaxagoras, and Socrates’ account of this encounter concerns precisely the relation between mind and nature. I quote the first part of what we learn about this event

30 The difference between these two perspectives in the *Phaedo* is discussed in Gerson 2003, 95–98.

31 On 96d8–97b3, see the comprehensive account in Macé 2006, 91–95.

and about how Socrates cheerfully anthropomorphizes, or even personalizes, Anaxagoras' cosmic *noûs*:

However, one day I heard somebody reading from what he said was a book by Anaxagoras, and saying that it turns out to be intelligence (νοῦς) that both orders things and is cause of everything. I was pleased with this cause, and it struck me that in a way it is good that intelligence should be cause of everything (δοξέ μοι τρόπον τινὰ εὖ ἔχειν τὸ τὸν νοῦν εἶναι πάντων αἴτιον), and I supposed that, if this is the case, when intelligence is doing the ordering it orders everything and assigns each thing in whatever way is best (τόν γε νοῦν κοσμοῦντα πάντα κοσμεῖν καὶ ἕκαστον τιθέναι ταύτῃ ὅπῃ ἂν βέλτιστα ἔχῃ). So, I thought, should someone want to discover the cause of how each thing comes to be, perishes, or is, this is what he must find out about it: how it is best for it either to be, or to act or be acted upon in any other respect whatsoever (ὅπῃ βέλτιστον αὐτῷ ἐστὶν ἢ εἶναι ἢ ἄλλο ὅτιοῦν πάσχειν ἢ ποιεῖν).³² What is more, on this theory (ἐκ δὲ δὴ τοῦ λόγου) a human being should consider nothing other than what is optimal or best, concerning both that thing itself and everything else. The same person is bound to know the worse too, for it is the same knowledge that concerns them both. So by reasoning like this (ταῦτα δὴ λογιζόμενος) I thought to my delight that I had found in Anaxagoras a teacher of the cause of things that fitted my own intelligence (τῆς αἰτίας περὶ τῶν ὄντων κατὰ νοῦν ἐμαυτῷ). (97b8–d8)

Various translations of *noûs* in this passage have been proposed, but “intelligence” is a good rendering that does not inadvertently imply the more technical division of the soul, of which νοῦς (“intellect” or “reason”) would be the part that opposes the soul's irrational parts. Socrates certainly does not imply such a division here, but he also does not maintain the Anaxagorean separation of *noûs* from everything else including the soul (a separation hesitantly affirmed in Aristotle's *De anima* I 2, 405a13–19). More exactly, Socrates will end up *regretting* such a separation, or at least being suspicious of

32 On this expression and the whole issue of acting and being acted upon in Socrates' account of Anaxagoras, see Macé 2006, 96–99. Macé's chapter on the *Phaedo* intersects thematically with this (and partially the next) section, but it is broader in its focus, especially in offering more detail about causation and the Forms. Vasiliou 2021 has an unorthodox account of the soul in the *Phaedo* and its possible mixture with the corporeal element, which I will also cite in the next chapter.

it, in a move that anticipates the later criticism of the Forms as causes, namely that the mode of their causal influence on things remains entirely elusive. In contrast, Socrates initially expects a smooth transition between the power of *noūs* over the universal order of things and the way in which human beings should reason about what is optimal and best in each individual case. The expression τὸ ἄριστον καὶ τὸ βέλτιστον is very general, and the subsequent explanation will make it clear that it covers both the order of the non-human universe and human affairs involving individual decisions about this or that course of action. It will never be entirely clear what the relation between these two realms is supposed to be, but it is clear that Socrates hoped that Anaxagoras' *noūs* would (though it ultimately did not) bridge the gap between them.³³

The ensuing explanation is accordingly divided into two parts, the first still dealing with natural phenomena and moving from Socrates' initial confidence in the explanatory power of Anaxagoras' *noūs* to his disappointment (98a2–c2), and the second illustrating the limits of Anaxagorean explanation in terms of human action. At 98c2–99b2, Socrates takes himself and his own situation as an example: the Anaxagorean account of Socrates' present position – his sitting in the Athenian prison, awaiting death – would acknowledge that Socrates is where he is and does what he does because of his intelligence, but it would ultimately only identify his physical constitution as the cause, and it would similarly, i.e., physiologically, explain Socrates' conversation with his friends. Socrates insists that such an account “would have neglected to give the real causes (ἀληθῶς αἰτίας), namely that, since the Athenians have thought (ἔδοξε) that it was better to condemn me, on account of that I too have also thought (δέδοκται) that it is better to sit here, and more just to stay put and suffer whatever punishment they decree” (98e1–5).

At this point, the issue of human agency as opposed to material causation comes into view quite clearly, although much remains obscure. The verb *dokein* conveys the reasoning about what is “better” than the alternative judgment and the alternative course of action, but this does little to clarify Socrates' original desire for a strong universal cause of all particular states of affairs. This desire implied a broad application of the *noūs*' capacity to

33 I take it that κατὰ νοῦν ἐμαυτῷ at 97d8 is a pun meant to underline this initial hope: Anaxagoras' cosmic *noūs* and Socrates' own intelligence would perhaps not be the same, but they would allow for the same kind of causal explanation. On this expression and its meaning, see, e.g., Gallop 1975, 174. The pun is clearly echoed at 98b8–9; see also Rowe 1993, 235.

“govern” or “rule” (κρατεῖν) all things, including every individual thing with a soul (see Anaxagoras DK 59 B 12 where *noūs* is also the source of its own power or self-rule: it is *autokratēs*). At the same time, Socrates imagines this power differently from the original teaching of his predecessor, where the rule of *noūs* implies nothing like the deliberation that is so prominent in Socrates’ example of the Athenian assembly and also in Socrates’ own thinking, which he very explicitly describes as deciding between alternatives. One might object that these alternatives are irrelevant in the sense that, in the constitution of the universe, it is clear to the universal νοῦς what the best option is, and so there is deliberation “about the ends” as Aristotle will put it. But the case of Socrates and the Athenians still remains different, unless we grant to Socrates the supreme intellectual power to both recognize that the Athenians were wrong and, by his acceptance of their decision, to use their error to offer us a universally valid philosophical lesson.

To develop this line of inquiry, we would have to turn to the *Crito*. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the agency discussed in this context is human agency and that neither the *Phaedo* nor the *Crito* presents us with any further details concerning the autonomy of the human soul in practical circumstances. Instead, Socrates concludes his autobiography by summarizing its theoretical lesson and distinguishing between the necessary and the sufficient causes, with the latter exemplified in the first person as “I, Socrates”: “However, saying that it is on account of [the necessary or material causes] that I do what I do, rather than because of my choice of what is best (ἀλλ’ οὐ τῇ τοῦ βελτίστου αἰρέσει), despite the fact that I act because of intelligence (νόῳ) – that would be a profoundly careless way to talk” (99a7–b2).

There is a remarkable contrast between Socrates’ unhesitating assertion of his choice (αἵρεσις) and his earlier and still valid confession of continuing inability to solve the puzzles about natural causes (96e5–7).³⁴ However, the fact that his *noūs* gives Socrates the capacity to choose his actions does not help to prove that the soul is immortal and indestructible. There is no internal evidence in this matter on a par with Socrates’ certainty that he truly

34 Cf. Hackforth 1955, 124 n. 2: “As these puzzles are all going to be given their solution by reference to the theory of Forms (100d–101c), it is surprising (though it does not seem to trouble the commentators) that Socrates should reply thus to Cebes’s question νῦν ... τί σοι δοκεῖ περὶ αὐτῶν; Socrates must mean that the problems still appear to him insoluble with the old conception of cause: in other words, the limitation expressed by κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον τῆς μεθόδου must be felt as applying to the whole of this speech.”

chose to stay in prison rather than escape. Therefore, an entirely new kind of argument will be necessary, one based on our ability to use *logos* to form hypotheses independently of any inquiry into nature including the nature of our actions. In a sense, there is a certain similarity between reasoning from hypotheses to explain current states of affairs and deliberating about the means but not the ends. However, this similarity has no direct bearing on the issue of the soul's immortality, let alone on the question of its possible agency after it leaves our body. For this reason, we need not discuss here the whole entangled issue of the aim and scope of Socrates' turning away from "looking into things" and "taking refuge in arguments" that can also reveal the "truth of things" (99d4–e6). It is not until 105b5 that the discussion returns to the soul and its immortality: a moment that is prepared by the previous extension of the first version of the hypothesis of Forms, an extension that begins at 103c10.

Between 99d4 and 103c9, then, we are offered a narrow view of Socrates' new kind of cause. In modern scholarship, this is probably the most debated part of the dialogue, beginning with the question of how the hypothetical method of introducing the Forms as causes relates to the aforementioned task of accounting for all generation and corruption.³⁵ Since this question has no direct bearing on the status of the soul, suffice it to say that Socrates never pretends that his hypothesis, especially as explained at 99d4–103c9, is intended to play such a role. By the same token, it cannot *directly* contribute to clarifying the position of the soul in relation to the processes by which things are generated and destroyed. This is especially true of everything that is said before 103c10, where Socrates modifies, or extends, his hypothesis in an important way. Prior to this extension, "generation and destruction", connected to Forms such as Largeness and Smallness, concerned only the properties of things but not things as such. The choice of these Forms and the example of the different sizes (i.e., body heights) of Socrates, Simmias, and Phaedo made it clear that the explanation focused on what makes a human being larger or smaller, but certainly not on where human beings come from or what are the conditions (or even the goals) of their continuing existence.

This narrow focus becomes particularly clear when we recall Socrates' earlier insistence that "one soul is neither more nor less soul than another one" (93d1–2), a statement that parallels the explanation about bees in

35 A bibliography on this issue would take several pages. The problem is well summarized in, e.g., Sharma 2009, with further references.

Meno 72a7–b7 quoted above. No description of a soul (or a bee) could capture its nature if it merely enumerated its properties, which allow for degrees. Similarly, Socrates may be smaller than Simmias, but he is no less a fully existing human being: he is smaller not *as a human being* but through a greater degree of his participation in Smallness. This participation conveys a property that is situated on a scale where things participate, to varying degrees, between the two opposites, Smallness and Largeness (102b–d). Of course, the degree of such a participation does not correspond to the degree of being: neither Simmias nor Socrates exist *to a lesser or a greater extent* as a result of their participation in the opposites. If we admit that our universe contains humans, bees, or souls as individuals rather than bundles of opposite properties, then the argumentation at 99d4–103c9 cannot concern the generation and destruction of such individuals.

This is a crude summary of the *limitations* of Socrates' first or safe version of his hypothesis, but my focus is on what is uncontroversial, regardless of how we solve the intricate puzzles of the mode of causal influence of the Forms such as Largeness or Smallness.³⁶ This summary also allows us to take most seriously both the shift that occurs at 103c10 and the new beginning announced by ἐξ ἀρχῆς at 105b5, where the soul returns to the foreground. Importantly, this whole development confirms that, in all cases where Plato argues with the Forms, the most important component of his argument is the nature of what instantiates them, since it is this nature that decides which Forms to select as relevant for the explanation. If, in the *Phaedo*, a crucial shift is about to occur, in which the simultaneous participation in two opposite Forms makes room for the participation in only one of these Forms, a simultaneous shift to new kinds of participants is also required. After all, the whole reason for offering a refined version of Socrates' hypothesis is to return to the soul and the issue of its individual immortality: something that, again, can hardly be a matter of degree.

Socrates begins the shift at 103c10–d3 by introducing two new pairs of entities: the Hot and the Cold (τὸ θερμόν and τὸ ψυχρόν), as well as fire and snow. The novelty consists in demonstrating that *certain* opposite properties, namely being hot and being cold, cannot coexist in *certain* participants. It is clear that other things that participate in the Hot can also participate in the Cold: for example, human beings have measurably different degrees

36 I also leave aside the fact that, in certain cases, Socrates' opposite Forms as causes seem to perpetuate the ambiguity that Socrates found in the previous causal explanations where causes seemed to him to bring about the opposite effects. On this difficulty, see Fine 1989, 393 n. 15 (with a range of examples).

of temperature (just as they have different tallness or smallness). But Socrates' focus is on the case where a given thing or participant and a given property (conveyed by a Form) connect *essentially*, at a hundred percent, so to speak, and with complete exclusion of the opposite property. Let us take a closer look at how Socrates builds his case:

I'd like you to go on to consider the following too, he said, and see if it turns out that you agree with me. Do you call something "hot", and something "cold"?

Yes, I do.

Are they just what you call "snow" and "fire"?

Certainly not.

Rather, you call the hot (τὸ θερμόν) something different from fire, and the cold (τὸ ψυχρόν) something different from snow?

Yes.

But you do believe this much, I think, that while it is snow it will never admit the hot (οὐδέποτε χιόνα γ' οὖσαν δεξαμένην τὸ θερμόν), in the way that we were discussing earlier, and continue to be just what it was, snow, as well as something hot, but when the hot is approaching it will either retreat from the hot or perish (ἀλλὰ προσιόντος τοῦ θερμοῦ ἢ ὑπεκχωρήσειν αὐτῷ ἢ ἀπολεῖσθαι).

Certainly.

Yes, and again when the cold is approaching fire, the fire will either withdraw or perish (καὶ τὸ πῦρ γε αὖ προσιόντος τοῦ ψυχροῦ αὐτῷ ἢ ὑπεξίεναι ἢ ἀπολεῖσθαι), but it will never have the nerve (οὐ μέντοι ποτέ τολμήσειν) to admit the coldness and continue to be just what it was, fire, as well as cold. (103c10–d12)

What fire and snow do and what is done to them is described in peculiarly personified terms, and the same is true of the Hot and the Cold since the Hot's (impossible) interaction with snow and the Cold's (impossible) interaction with fire are rendered as a struggle for territory in which attacks and tactical retreats follow one another.³⁷ At 104b–c, Socrates will use the same style while summarizing this version of his hypothesis, including the case of the Even and the Odd, which, like the Hot and the Cold, cannot be instantiated by one and the same entity. In fact, this second case is even clearer

37 For more on this description, see O'Brien 1977, who uses the analogy of two armies taking turns invading the same territory.

since nothing can really be odd and even at the same time and in the same respect (see 103e2–105b3). Nevertheless, the talk about approaching and retreating is hardly intended to impart true agency to snow or fire, let alone “three” (an example of what is always odd and never admits the Even).³⁸ Yet it is also possible that these metaphors are preparing the way for the case of the soul, where the spatial metaphors would fit with the soul as mobile by definition so that its “retreat” is much easier or natural to imagine. Unsurprisingly, this imaginability follows precisely from our willingness to endow the soul with its own agency, a willingness that we do not extend to fire or snow, let alone to being three.

This last point is reinforced by the fact that the soul, unlike the mass terms “snow” and “fire”, and also unlike “three”, is an individual. Socrates does not offer a specific theoretical view of the different natures of the entities he uses to refine his hypothesis, but these natures are of paramount importance. They must be, otherwise the conclusion about the soul would be parallel to that about snow and fire, namely that the soul, in certain situations, either retreats or perishes.³⁹ There is no doubt that Socrates is aware of this problem since he will treat it later by specifically addressing the issue of indestructibility at 105e11–106c7. Before we examine his argument in these lines, we must first determine what exactly connects the case of the soul with the new beginning announced at 105b5.

This new beginning consists, at first, of summarizing the development of Socrates’ reasoning thus far:

Then tell me again from the start, he said. And don’t give as your answer whatever I say in my question, but follow my example. I say this because, besides that safe answer I gave at first, I see another kind of safety, thanks to what we are saying now. For if you were to ask me what it is that, when it comes to be present in anything’s body (τί ἐν τῷ σώματι), makes the thing hot (ἐγγένηται θερμὸν ἔσται), I will not give that safe, ignorant answer – namely that it is hotness – but, thanks to

38 Here a caveat is in order: the case of “three” and “the Odd” will be expanded to include the question of how the Odd relates to “Threeness”. In other words, Socrates will sketch, but not solve, the problem of how the Forms relate to each other. I will not deal with this issue, which is metaphysically important yet immaterial for my present purpose. Similarly, I will not discuss the apparently analogical relations between the Hot and fire, and Illness and fever, at 105b5–c6 (quoted below). Bolton 1998, 109–111, offers the most concise summary of these issues.

39 For a clear presentation of this problem, see Bostock 1986, 190.

what we now say, a more ingenious one: that it is fire. And if you ask what it is that, when it comes to be present in any body, makes the body ill, I will not say that it is illness, but that it is fever. And if asked what it is that, when it comes to be present in any number, makes the number odd, I will not say that it is oddness, but that it is oneness, and so on for the rest. (105b5–c6)

In contrast to the initial hypothesis, this is an ambitious statement that seems to bring together Socrates' new kind of cause with his initial interest in natural philosophy (and the philosophy of mathematics).⁴⁰ Simply put, different causes operate on two distinct levels, one within and one without bodies. Regardless of my body's state, we hypothesize the Hot which conveys the property of being hot, and it conveys this property to the particular configuration of matter that we call "fire". The temperature difference of Socrates' and Simmias' bodies is then attributed to the action of fire in their bodies, which is perfectly consistent with the fire's essential and invariable instantiation of the Hot. What we notice, however, is that even this version of the hypothesis avoids saying that the Hot somehow produces fire in the sense of being responsible for the existence of the natural kind (or element) "fire" in the first place. This is not surprising since if we review everything that Plato says about the Forms and things related to them, we discover that the ultimate origin of individuals (things without opposites, like souls or human beings, what we call natural kinds) is invariably attributed to the agency of a demiurgic, craft-like, and intelligent cause, which does not "participate" in the Forms of opposite properties but "imitates" the Form of the natural kind in question while creating the conditions for its embodied existence.⁴¹ In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is concerned only with the generation and destruction of properties, not with the origin of their bearers, including the soul.

⁴⁰ For some qualifications on this point, see, however, Rowe 1993, 258–259.

⁴¹ In the *Phaedo*, where the origin of fire is not discussed, the connection between the Hot and fire offers a sufficient (if limited) explanation (see 103c10–d12 and 104e7–105c7). In the *Timaeus*, the Hot is replaced by the Form of fire that the demiurge directly reenacts in matter (see 51c and 53c–55c), thus creating the conditions for the coming into existence of stars and humans, and then other beings that make our universe resemble its model or blueprint. Starting with Aristotle, most readers confound these two different perspectives, not in the least because they do not take seriously Plato's willingness to use artefacts as exemplary things, precisely because we can understand their origin without the need to analyze the primordial mixture of everything with everything.

How, then, does the soul fit into Socrates' "more ingenious" explanation? On the linguistic level, it fits in the easiest way since, as I already suggested, the military language of occupying or retreating is suitable to the soul's mission, which is based on its mobility (cf. the "patrolling" of the souls in the universe in *Phaedrus* 246b6–7). More importantly, Socrates' language prepares the ground for making the soul fit conceptually: the body can now be described as a territory that the soul comes to occupy, not as a prison but as a ground where it can exercise its capacities and make the body alive. This is what Socrates establishes with his first question to Cebes: "What is it that, when it comes to be present in any body, makes the body alive ($\phi\acute{\iota}\ \alpha\upsilon\ \tau\acute{\iota}\ \acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta\tau\alpha\iota\ \sigma\acute{\omega}\mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \zeta\acute{\omega}\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\alpha\iota$)?" (105c8–9). Without hesitation, Cebes answers "soul", and he also agrees that this is what the soul does "always", each and every time it comes to occupy a body (105d1–2). This seems to imply that the soul acts as the cause of animation independently of its full-blooded agency since this is what it does, automatically, whenever it enters a suitable body. That this is exactly Socrates' view is confirmed by the following and rather sketchy argument, which, at 105d3–12, quickly shifts its focus from the soul to life and back again. First, "whenever soul occupies ($\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\sigma\chi\eta$) anything," it "always comes to it bringing life" ($\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\sigma\alpha\ \zeta\omega\acute{\eta}\nu$). Second, Life ($\zeta\omega\acute{\eta}$) has an opposite, namely Death ($\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$). Third, as in the previous cases, the soul "will never admit the opposite of what it itself always imports" ($\phi\acute{\iota}\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\epsilon\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\epsilon\acute{\iota}$). Socrates adds a fourth step to this argument by giving additional and partially linguistic reasons for calling the soul "immortal" or $\acute{\alpha}\text{-}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\nu$ in the same sense that we call "un-even" what does not admit the Form of the Even, "un-musical" what does not admit "the Musical", and "un-just" what does not admit "the Just" (105d13–e4).

This addition is rather puzzling since the Musical and especially the Just seem to lead us back to the first version of Socrates' hypothesis: they are both more like Largeness or Beauty than the Hot or the Even, since the participants in these properties should be able to exist even when they exhibit some degree of their opposites. At 65d4–e5 and then 75c10–d4, the Just was listed together with other Forms (including Beauty and the Good that are present in both lists and Largeness in the first one) that do not admit their opposites, whereas their participants clearly do. In this respect, the Just seems much closer to Largeness than to the Hot or the Even, simply because it is difficult to find a bearer of this property that would be a hundred percent just and "withdraw or perish" at the approach of Injustice. Furthermore, if we take seriously the possibility that the Musical could be participated in by something that excludes the participation in its opposite, then such participant in the Musical would seem very much like the soul as

harmonia, regardless of the broader sense of the word. Be that as it may, the whole reasoning, including its lexical dimension, implies less the immortality of the soul than the astonishing variety of cases that seem to preclude us from establishing a single and universally valid scheme of participation in the Forms. Rather, we are invited to exercise our ingenuity in the search for things that admit a certain property but never its opposite.

However, there is something unique about the opposites of Life and Death that Socrates does not mention, even though it might strengthen his case for the immortality of the soul. Unlike the previous cases of the Hot and the Cold, the Even and the Odd, which all have their essential participants, there is no *full* instantiation in the case of Death as the opposite of Life. There is something essentially hot (fire), something essentially cold (snow), and something essentially alive (the soul), but there is nothing essentially dead. If living beings are animate because of the presence of the soul, being inanimate is not due to the presence of Death or any other Form: a piece of iron or a chair is not animate, but it would seem awkward to say that they are “dead”. We speak of a “dead body” when the soul has left the previously animate compound, but this is a metonymy: the body in question reverts to the inanimate nature of its components. Simply put, being inanimate does not require a special agency similar to the soul, an agency that would convey the opposite of what the soul conveys. It is true that Socrates will mention “the mortal part of a human being” that dies when Death approaches (106e4–5), but no further agency beyond this “attack” (a colorful idiom for participation) is required for this to happen. This is entirely compatible with Socrates’ earlier definition of death as simply the separation of the (from now on inanimate) body and the (hopefully surviving) soul (see again 64c4–8).

All this will excuse us if we think that the soul is treated here as a hypothesis that helps us to explain life when we have no empirically based scientific explanation of it. Such hypothesis would be parallel to Socrates’ introduction of the Forms as alternative causes that replace missing explanations in terms of natural philosophy. In other words, if we do not know how to explain the origin of life in certain natural compounds, the action of the soul is a simple hypothesis on a par with the introduction of Forms, which explain the presence of various opposite properties in things. The important thing is to emphasize the similarity, not identity, of the two situations: the very *existence* of the soul is thus never connected to the Forms. Of course, the existing soul necessarily participates in Life, but there is no action of Life that would generate the soul (just as, again, no Form is ever described as generating things without any further mediation).

It is not impossible that this is precisely what inspires Socrates to take up a final challenge, which echoes the previous use of the expression “immortal and indestructible” (88b6, 95c1). In fact, this challenge results logically from the situation in which it has been shown that being alive does not admit of degrees, yet the explanation of the soul’s essential aliveness left untouched the proper nature of the soul as an individual bearer and conveyor of the property “being alive”. In this way, Socrates and Cebes may well agree that the soul is, indeed, “immortal” in the sense of never admitting the property imparted, hypothetically, by Death as the opposite of Life. Yet their agreement does not dispel the worry that the soul, while never dying in the narrow or technical sense of the term (“participating in Death”), could suffer at the approach of Death so thoroughly that it would simply cease to exist, which would render the issue of its properties immaterial. We may thus be excused for thinking that the life of the immortal soul should not be defined by always running away from Death and that its own indestructible nature should be affirmed independently of Socrates’ causal puzzles and their hypothetical solutions.

4 Soul’s Agency and Indestructibility

On the reading outlined in the previous paragraph, the return to the indestructibility of the soul is more than a parenthetical appendix to Socrates’ previous argument about immortality. When Cebes wondered whether the soul was “both immortal and indestructible” (95c1), it may have seemed that these two adjectives were synonymous and that “indestructible” was simply added for greater emphasis. However, a possible new connection between these two attributes is implied at 106b1–3 and, at 106c9–d1, Socrates suddenly suggests that, in addition to having secured the soul’s immortality, we may need to explicitly agree that, by the same token, the soul is also indestructible. In a curious turn of argument, any further discussion of this potential difference will be closed almost as soon as it is opened, but this closure was insufficient for some readers who, starting with Strato of Lampascus, wondered whether the apparent inference from the soul’s immortality to its indestructibility was truly warranted.

Strato’s concern seems to me justified, and in analyzing the relevant passage I will quote some recent readers who share the same worry. I will also give a brief reminder of the connection between the soul’s immortality and indestructibility in *Republic* x, which seems to provide the argument missing from the *Phaedo* (and on which see more in Chapter 3.3). Finally, I will

ask how the shift discernible at 106a–107b announces certain themes and images that play an important role in Socrates' concluding myth: a story extraordinary for its level of detail about the souls' post-mortem environment and also for the way in which it allows the souls to retain their individual memory and capacity for moral judgment. The relationship between the issue of indestructibility and the portrayal of souls in the myth will thus foreshadow the topics of the next two chapters: it will hint at why the soul cannot be presented as fully incorporeal (an issue discussed in detail in the next chapter); and it will give us a taste of the central role of souls as animating causes that sustain the structured life in the universe, an issue treated from a broader perspective in chapter Four.

It is significant that Socrates does not return to indestructibility by focusing only on the soul, but in the broader context of his refined hypothesis. Indestructibility in the sense of being ἀνώλεθρος was last mentioned at 95c1, where Socrates summarized his task of demonstrating that the soul was “indestructible and immortal”. Without any further analysis of this expression, it then started to seem that being indestructible was actually the same as being immortal, so that perishing (in the case of fire or snow, or “three” when “attacked” by the Even) and dying (in the case of the soul) would amount to basically the same kind of event, one of some further unanalyzed dissolution of the given bearer of properties (see the recurring expression “either withdraw or perish”). Hence the above-stated problem: if the snow *can* be destroyed at the approach of the Hot and “three” *can* cease to be by succumbing to the opposite of the Odd, why could the soul not perish at the approach of Death? It is not until 105e11–106a6 that the problem is fully addressed and Socrates establishes a specific connection between immortality and indestructibility. To do so, he first outlines a hypothetical case in which even being three, or being hot or cold, would ultimately imply being indestructible:

Well then, if the un-even were necessarily indestructible (εἰ τῷ ἀναρτίῳ ἀναγκαῖον ἦν ἀνωλέθρῳ εἶναι), three would surely be indestructible (ἄλλο τι τὰ τρία ἢ ἀνώλεθρα), wouldn't it?

Yes, of course.

Now if the un-hot too were necessarily indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον), then when someone brought hot to snow, would the snow withdraw intact and unmelted (ὑπεξήει ἂν ἡ χιὼν οὕσα σῶς καὶ ἄτηκτος)? For it wouldn't be destroyed (οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἀπώλετό), at least, nor again would it stand its ground and admit the hotness.

That's true.

So too in the same way, I suppose, if the un-cold were indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον), then when something cold came to fire, the fire would never be extinguished, nor would it be destroyed (οὔποτ' ἂν ἀπεςβένυτο οὐδ' ἀπόλλυτο), but it would depart intact and be gone.

Necessarily. (105e11–106a11)

These lines revisit the previous alternative of “retreating *or* perishing”, and a shift in vocabulary helps to bring out the difference. Neither the adjective ἀνώλεθρον nor the verb ἀπόλλυμι were used by Socrates in his previous presentation of his refined hypothesis, and they both imply that the alternative under discussion is one of utter destruction. At the same time, right from the initial “if it were,” the whole situation is entirely hypothetical, and, as the next parts of the text will show, it will *not* be the case that the things that participate in the Odd or the Even, and also in the Hot and the Cold are, by the same token, indestructible. In a sense, one *could* argue that they possess a sort of weak and general imperishability, since there will always be some cooling snow and warming fire in our universe, and things or their parts will always be odd or even in number. But such a weak imperishability does not seem to be implied by Socrates’ sudden use of ἀνώλεθρον and ἀπόλλυμι, not in the least because the argument must aim at the soul as an individual, one which survives every event of the so-called death. As a result, now is a good time to reiterate the importance of the nature of things that participate in the Forms. Clearly, “being snow” or “being fire” are different from “being three” or “being odd”, and they are all fundamentally different from “being soul”. “Three” and “odd” are predicated of various constellations of objects, be they abstract or physical; snow and fire, in the sense of “stuff that cools things” and “stuff that warms things,” are mass terms with no truly individual features proper to this or that portion of them. Souls, on the other hand, are understood throughout the *Phaedo* as individuals capable of certain actions. These distinctions are not made explicit, but the special status of souls underpins Socrates’ next step, which does not logically prove but merely suggest that immortality and indestructibility may indeed be different properties. Nevertheless, Socrates will continue to assert that indestructibility follows quite directly from the participation in Life at the exclusion of its opposite.

This assertion is the point of departure for the final part of the effort to prove that the soul is immortal, a part that is completed before Socrates turns back to clarifying the moral motivation behind this effort. This last properly argumentative part divides rather neatly into two sections, the first of which is a straightforward application of previous reasoning to the case

of the soul (106b1–d1), while the second contains more freewheeling considerations, including the claim that what is “immortal” has a special place among all “indestructible” things (106d2–107a1). These two sections are different in tone, and the second one will be especially important for our overall assessment of what Socrates implies rather than states clearly about the nature of the soul. We must, however, begin with the first section:

Now is it necessary to talk in the following way about the immortal as well? If the immortal is indestructible too (εἰ μὲν τὸ ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀνώλεθρόν ἐστιν), then it is impossible for soul to be destroyed (ἀπόλλυσθαι) whenever death comes to it. Because, given what was said before, it won’t admit death or be dead, just as three won’t be even, as we were saying, nor again will the odd, and fire won’t be cold, nor will the hotness in the fire. “But,” someone might say, “why shouldn’t it be that, although the odd does not become even when the even comes to it, as was agreed, the odd is destroyed, and the even comes to be in place of it?” Now against someone who said this, we’d have no way of defending the claim that it does not perish, since the uneven is not indestructible (τὸ γὰρ ἀνάρτιον οὐκ ἀνώλεθρόν ἐστιν). For if we’d secured agreement to that, it would be easy for us to defend the claim that when the even comes to them the odd and three depart and are gone. And that is how we’d defend claims about fire, hot and the rest, isn’t it?

Certainly.

So too in the present case, that of the immortal (περὶ τοῦ ἀθανάτου), if we secure agreement that it is indestructible too, then soul would be indestructible as well as being immortal. Otherwise we’d need some other argument. (106b1–d1)

It is the intervention of “someone” that brings about the crucial admission that will lead to the argument’s final twist. The admission is simple, but its possible consequences are not: as things stand at this point, we have to agree that “the uneven is *not* indestructible” (and similarly about “fire, hot and the rest”) though we could still try to find some counter-arguments. However, it *might* seem that we still need to find a *new* argument concerning the soul and its indestructibility too. If not, then perhaps the property of being immortal will suffice to dispel our doubts, and we can claim that the soul, in so far as it is immortal, is also indestructible.

Accepting this would seem to be a disappointment for those who would like to see a stronger and better-structured argument, in which “what is

immortal is indestructible” would be a true conclusion rather than a reaffirmed premise that cannot be logically derived from previous arguments.⁴² Cebes, however, agrees on the spot. But he explains his agreement in a way that confirms that we are moving beyond the previously established ground of Socrates’ new causes:

But there’s no need [for some other argument], at least on that account. For there would hardly be anything else (τι ἄλλο) that does not admit destruction (φθορά), if the immortal, despite being everlasting, will admit destruction (εἰ τό γε ἀθάνατον αἰδιδιον ὃν φθορὰν δέξεται). (106d2–4)

In just one compound sentence, Cebes is not only generous in directly associating immortality with indestructibility, but he seems to derive them from being everlasting or eternal (αἰδιδιον): the eternal life suddenly *guarantees* both “immortality” and “indestructibility”. And since the immortality in question is that of the soul, Cebes’ emphatic remark seems to echo the first argument of the dialogue, including its cosmological horizon. Lines 72c2–d7 come to mind here, where Socrates worries that the dying of what is alive and animates bodies could lead to universal death. At this point, however, Socrates shows no desire to return to his first attempt (on the function and implications of which see Chapter 4.1). Instead, he makes explicit another strain of Cebes’ answer and, in a few lines, secures his final approval:

Yes, and as for god, I suppose, and the Form of Life itself (ὁ δέ γε θεὸς οἶμαι καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς εἶδος καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο ἀθάνατόν ἐστιν), and any other immortal thing there may be, it would be agreed by everyone that they are never destroyed (μηδέποτε ἀπόλλυσθαι).

Indeed, by all people, certainly, and even more so, I imagine, by gods (καὶ ἔτι μάλλον, ὥς ἐγὼ μαι, παρὰ θεῶν).

So because the immortal is also exempt from destruction (ἀδιάφθορον), surely soul, if it really is immortal, would also be indestructible, wouldn’t it (εἰ ἀθάνατος τυγχάνει οὐσα, καὶ ἀνώλεθρος ἂν εἴη)?

42 The problem is, of course, exacerbated by various problems that are caused by the ambiguity of certain expressions. One of these, noted by several interpreters and summarized in, e.g., Gallop 1975, 217, concerns the expression “the immortal”, τὸ ἀθάνατόν: does it refer to *that which* is immortal, or to the *property* of being immortal? Without going into detail, I believe the former option makes much better sense in the light of what the argument’s basic aim is.

It absolutely must.

In that case, when death attacks the human being, the mortal part of him dies, it seems, whereas the immortal part departs intact and undestroyed, and is gone, having retreated from Death.

So it appears.

And so, he said, more surely than anything, Cebes, soul is immortal and indestructible, and our souls really will exist in Hades (καὶ τῷ ὄντι ἔσονται ἡμῶν αἱ ψυχαὶ ἐν ᾿Αΐδου). (106d5–107a1)

Compared to the previous pages, this exchange seems unfocused and at times confusing. In particular, the redescription of our death in terms of our “mortal part” dying at the approach of Death leaves us wishing for a more detailed description of participating in Life versus being destroyed at the approach of Death. However, there are good reasons for Socrates’ grand claims in these few lines. To equate the soul generously with the gods and the Form of life is an appeal, without any analytical distinction, to the nature of indestructible entities since gods and Life have this character simply by virtue of their constitution: they are what they are, originally and immutably. To think of the soul in the same way may ultimately be the safest way to ensure, for the sake of a philosophical argument, its immortality. Paradoxically, as we are reminded by the presence of Life as a Form, we are on roughly the same hypothetical ground as when Socrates introduces the Forms as causes. Nevertheless, it is clear that the “immortal things” mentioned by Socrates in this text are the instances of life par excellence: life that does not take place in any particular composition of corporeal elements.⁴³ For this reason, we may be forgiven for thinking that Socrates is preparing us for the great cosmic vision that he will soon convey through

43 A certain difficulty concerns the exact status of Life, which seems to be introduced here as a Platonic Form that instantiates the property it conveys to other things. Such cases are rare and only Beauty is unequivocally described as beautiful (*Hippias Major* 292e; the case of justice and piety in *Protagoras* 330c–e is unclear as these may not be separate Forms). The case of Life is difficult, no less than that of “the intelligible living beings” in the *Timaeus*. On Life and being alive in our text, see, e.g., Rowe 1993, 263–264. Also, as Gallop 1975, 218, rightly notes, the Form of Death, required by the overall shape of the argument, would be even more awkward were we to suppose that it is “dead”.

his myth, in which the gods will associate with those souls who deserve it. Hence the cosmological undertones of the quoted passage.⁴⁴

Of course, if we confine ourselves to the narrow logic of the argument, we may find both the inference from immortality to indestructibility and the opposite inference from indestructibility to immortality inadequate. After all, if Cebes is reassured by the resulting picture, Simmias remains skeptical to the end and Socrates expresses sympathy for his skepticism and reminds us that his hypotheses cannot transcend the limits of human intellect (107a8–b9). Various objections raised against these hypotheses and the arguments that follow from them are thus integral to the reception of the *Phaedo*, beginning with Strato of Lampsacus' targeting of the arguments meant to demonstrate the soul's immortality. Although our knowledge of Strato's own argumentation is only fragmentary (his objections have come down to us thanks to the quotations in Damascius' much later commentary on the *Phaedo*), we can be confident about his main doubt concerning the soul's indestructibility.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is the same doubt that I have repeatedly expressed in the preceding paragraphs, a doubt that Strato helps us sharpen while reminding us of its wider context, including Socrates' conclusion and the possibility of reading it as an invitation to the coming myth and its cosmology. Here is the final part of Strato's fragment 80 and the beginning of fragment 81 (in Sharples' 2011 edition and translation):

May it not be that, as fire cannot be cooled as long as it exists, so the soul is deathless as long as it exists (ἔστ' ἄν ᾗ)? For it also imparts life as long as it exists.

May it not be that, even if we escape all the other [objections], we will not refute [the argument that the soul] is limited and has a limited power (δύναμιν ἔχειν πεπερασμένην)? For let it impart life and be separable in its substance and not admit the death which is opposite to the

44 For a partly similar argument about the whole passage, see Gallop 1975, 220–221, who wants to defend it against the harsh criticism of commentators like Hackforth 1955, 164. For a cosmological reading of lines 106d5–107a1, see, e.g., Pakaluk 2010, 672–674.

45 For the relevant text, with translation, see Sharples 2011, fr. 80–81. For an earlier edition, see Westerink 1977. Hackforth 1955, 195–198, translates a still earlier text edited by Wehrli 1950. On various aspects of Strato's criticism, see, e.g., Bluck 1955, 192–194, Isnardi-Parente 1977, Modrak 2011, Repici 2011, Gertz 2011, 152–158, Baltussen 2015, Sedley 2018. Frede 1978, Kanayama 2000, 80–87, Dixsaut 2001, Dorter 2001, and Miura 2018 scrutinize the problem independently of Strato (although Frede mentions him and Dixsaut takes him for her starting point). I will say more on Frede 1978 at the end of this section, but I cannot discuss the other interpretations.

life that is imparted; [even so], being on its own, it will grow weary at some point and be destroyed by being extinguished on its own, without anything assailing it from outside.

(...)

But in this way, Strato says, the life in the subject does not admit its opposite either; for it does not remain, when it admits death, for neither does cold [remain when it admits] heat. So the life in the subject is deathless, just as cold is heatless, and yet it is destroyed.

Next, he says, destruction is not the admitting of death (οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ φθορὰ θανάτου παραδοχή), for on this basis no living creature will be destroyed; for it does not remain a living creature when it has admitted death, but it is by losing its life that it has died; for death is the losing of life.

The gist of the objection is this: Socrates did not dispel Cebes' concern about the soul's long-term destructibility because the formal argument based on the opposite properties and their Forms does not address what the concern is really about, namely the soul's nature. As a result, it is possible to agree that the soul is narrowly or technically immortal "as long as it exists"⁴⁶ without inferring from this kind of immortality that the nature of the soul would preclude the destruction by some factor other than the loss of participation in Life. Simply put, death (θάνατος), defined as the loss of the property "being alive", and destruction (φθορά) as the complete annihilation of the bearer of any property, are not one and the same.

Formally, this is a neatly phrased objection that reveals the limits of formal arguments in favor of immortality. Seen in this light, Strato's objection contains one intriguing detail: the mention of the soul's (perhaps limited) power (δύναμις), with the assumption that this power cannot be derived from the scheme of participation in the Forms. In this context, it's worth noting that Socrates avoids mentioning the soul's *dunamis* at all throughout his attempts to prove its immortality. From Strato's point of view, this is a curious avoidance of addressing the terms in which Cebes, for the first time in the dialogue, responds to Socrates' hope for immortality by suggesting that such a noble hope "doubtless requires no little reassurance and proof, that the soul exists when the human being has died, and has some power

46 Strato's repeated "as long as it exists" (ἔστ' ἂν ἧ) clearly echoes ὅτανπερ ἧ from *Phaedo* 103e5: certain things have the features imparted by a given Form (but not by the latter's opposite) *whenever they exist*.

and wisdom" (καὶ τινα δύνανται ἔχει καὶ φρόνησιν) (70b2–4). This suggestion is the true starting point of the entire sequence of proofs, and if φρόνησις reappears, albeit briefly, in the recollection and the affinity arguments as the state (τὸ πάθημα) of the separate soul that grasps the unchanging objects of knowledge (76c12, 79d7), the soul's δύνανται will play no part in any subsequent argument.

It is true that δύνανται is a term with a broad range of meanings, but, at 70a–b, Cebes does not have any technical sense of the word in mind. He simply wants to be reassured that the soul retains its capacity for doing and also experiencing or suffering something. By the same token, he clearly assumes that such capacity belongs to the soul as "our" soul, a part of the human being. Indeed, we know that Socrates himself recurs repeatedly to characterizing the soul in terms of its power or rule over the body, making this power analogical to the rule of gods over human beings. In the *Phaedo*, this reasoning does not develop into an actual argument but, rather, takes the form of an assumption that would make it easier to extend this power into the afterlife. This does not mean that Plato would renounce offering such an argument. He does so in *Republic* x, whose proof of the soul's immortality is a true complement to the final proof in the *Phaedo*, precisely because, instead of speaking about the soul's properties derived from the Forms, it addresses the soul's own nature as a prevention against the soul's destruction.

Since I will deal with the proof presented in *Republic* x in Chapter 3.2, in the context of the soul's problematic and never really affirmed incorporeality, here I only wish to stress that this proof's focus is exactly on what the *Phaedo* leaves aside: the *inherent* cause of destruction.⁴⁷ This is quite different from what Socrates does in the affinity argument, where he describes the soul as being closer to the simplicity of the Forms than to the composite character of the visible and tangible body, but ultimately identical to neither (see Chapter 3.1). In the *Republic*, no such peculiar in-betweenness

47 This complementarity is often overlooked. See Palmer 2021, 40–42, who offers an excellent analysis of the issue of indestructibility and states, in my view correctly, that the specification of the soul's nature requires us to look beyond the *Phaedo* (precisely to answer "the question as to whether soul is not only deathless in this limited sense but indestructible as well," 41), but he then turn to the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, i.e., to the soul's self-motion. This is no doubt correct, but the contrasting correspondence between the *Phaedo* and *Republic* x seems tighter. Dixsaut 1991, 401 n. 332, sees the connection and speaks about "a supplementary proof".

is suggested. Instead, the question is whether the soul has some internal flaw or its own “badness”, which would be the seed and then the cause of its demise, which would be of the same kind as the decline of other things. The argument therefore begins by positing the bad as the opposite of the good and the force of destruction and corruption (cf. τὸ ἀπολλύον καὶ διαφθεῖρον πᾶν τὸ κακὸν εἶναι, 608e3–4), with an understanding that “there is a good and a bad for each thing” (ἐκάστω τι) according to its nature, like “ophthalmia for the eyes, sickness for the whole body, blight for grain, rot for wood, rust for iron or bronze”, so that there is a natural badness and sickness for almost everything (σχεδὸν πᾶσι σύμφυτον ἐκάστω κακὸν τε καὶ νόσημα) (608e6–609a4).

The key term of the argument is σύμφυτον: it is the flaw inherent in each thing that leads to its final dissolution, and it is this process that deserves the name “destruction”. According to Socrates, each thing is ultimately destroyed *only* by its own internal (indeed connatural) flaw or affliction (πονηρία). A thing without such affliction would be “naturally incapable of being destroyed” (τοῦ πεφυκότος οὕτως ὀλεθρος οὐκ ἦν, 609b6–7). As a result, to prove that the soul is indestructible, and therefore immortal, it is enough to show that it has no inherent flaw that would affect its specific nature, which Socrates does in two steps. First, he explains that moral vices cannot destroy the soul in the same way that disease destroys the body (609b11–d7). Second, he gives a number of reasons for why the soul is separate from the afflictions that are proper to the bodies (609d9–611a1).

The next chapter will analyze the problems that arise from this tortuous argument, but here it is not the success (or failure) of the proof that is important. What is important for *our* purposes is that this proof treats the soul as a natural individual that differs from physical bodies by its capacity to become, by its own actions, good or bad, virtuous or vicious, without ever being destroyed by its vices. In short, by insisting from the outset on the soul’s indestructibility, without turning to the hypothesis of Forms and the scheme of participation, *Republic* x relies on an understanding of the soul as a full-blooded agent that also has the characteristics of an immortal substance. The latter term may sound anachronistic, but I use it with the same caution as Dorothea Frede in her important analysis of Socrates’ final argument in the *Phaedo*: the “crucial thing seems to be that Plato treats the soul as a substance (no such term is, of course, used) with attributes of its own and life among them” – indeed, “the defense of the formal correctness of Plato’s final argument depends on the presupposition that he regards the soul as something like a substance” rather than as some sort of immanent

character or even the Form that brings Life to bodies.⁴⁸ Understanding the soul as discussed in the *Phaedo* as a kind of separable substance is an interpretive step, but such a step can help us understand what the soul really is, even if “Plato leaves the nature of the soul undefined.”⁴⁹

5 The Afterlife

Regardless of this lack of definition, both the *Phaedo* and the complementary argument in *Republic* x imply that the soul is like a substance in the minimal sense that its nature cannot be derived from its properties. We can, of course, say that the soul is the only entity that participates directly in Life, but this does not convey the soul's nature in the sense of “what it does and what is done to it” (to use the formula from *Phaedrus* 245c3). Participation in Life explains why the soul is alive and why the bodies are alive through its presence, but it says almost nothing about why there are souls capable of self-motion and a wide range of actions that cannot be reduced to animating a particular body. This is why the formal structure of the final proof offered in the *Phaedo* leaves aside any stronger sense of the soul's agency. The latter, however, is a prerequisite for Socrates' further steps, which will determine how the dialogue unfolds before its final scene. More precisely, without the assumption of the soul's agency and its irreducibility to human agency, we could hardly make sense of Socrates' fast-paced *double turn*, whereby he first offers a moral lesson (107c1–d5, echoed in the return to the ascetic imperative at 114d1–115a9) and then delivers an eschatological myth that exemplifies and magnifies this lesson in unexpected detail (107d5–114c9). I will deal with the long myth selectively, but it is important to quote the moral consideration that introduces it:

48 Frede 1978, 33.

49 Frede 1978, 39. As the previous paragraphs have made clear, I do not agree with Frede's assumption that “whatever is alive, whether it possesses life as an essential property or not, can only pass out of existence by accepting death, by dying” (32). This reasoning is also assumed in Denyer 2007, 94–95, and analyzed in Palmer 2021, 40 n. 44. Let me reiterate: the hypothetical destruction of the soul would target it as a bearer of all relations of participation. The soul would then not be alive, but, not being at all, it would not be dead (in the technical sense of the term) either. Instead, by ceasing to exist, it would lose all properties. Such a complete destruction is precisely what Socrates tries to preclude in *Republic* x as summarized above and interpreted in detail in Chapter 3.2.

But, gentlemen,⁵⁰ he said, it is right to think this much: that if the soul actually is immortal (εἴπερ ἡ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος), then it needs to be cared for, not only for the sake of the time in which what we call “living” goes on, but for the sake of all time; and that now the dangers of neglecting the soul really would seem to be dreadful. For if death were separation from everything, it would be a godsend for wicked people to die, and thus be separated both from the body and at the same time, by also losing their soul, from their own vice. But, now, since the soul appears to be immortal (νῦν δ’ ἐπειδὴ ἀθάνατος φαίνεται οὖσα), it could have no means of safety or of escaping evils, other than becoming both as good and as wise as possible. For the soul comes to Hades with nothing other than its education and its way of life (πλήν τῆς παιδείας τε καὶ τροφῆς), which are said to confer the very greatest benefit or harm upon one who has died, as soon as his journey there starts. (107c1–d5)

On a careful reading, this text relies on the hypothesis of immortality but does not depend on any rigorous proof of it.⁵¹ Moreover, the renewed emphasis on the ethical dimension requires the soul to have some “substantial” individuality that underpins its passage to Hades as continuous with its education and way of life: something that goes beyond participation in Life but depends on the soul’s choices and actions (*trophē* at 107d4 directly echoes the bad way of life at 81d9 and the good way of life at 84b4, both of which are associated with the afterlife).

At the same time, Socrates’ exhortation to care for our souls conveys the central ambiguity of Platonic anthropology: on the one hand, a human being is a soul-body compound; on the other hand, the analysis of this compound leads to the conclusion that a human being is in fact their soul. The *First Alcibiades*, in particular, deconstructs the concept of “human being”

50 There indeed are only men present, and, at this point, Socrates’ ὧ ἄνδρες is reminiscent of the rhetorical use of this expression (attested in Antiphon or Lysias) in the sense of “gentlemen of the jury”.

51 In taking εἴπερ ἡ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος and νῦν δ’ ἐπειδὴ ἀθάνατος φαίνεται οὖσα for broadly synonymous, I follow the translation of the latter expression by Bluck (“since the soul is seen to be immortal”) and Grube (“but now that the soul appears to be immortal”) rather than Hackforth (“now that we have found the soul to be immortal”), Gallop (“since, in fact, it is evidently immortal”) or Sedley and Long (“since the soul is evidently immortal”). The same issue arises again at 114d4 (ἐπεὶπερ ἀθάνατόν γε ἡ ψυχὴ φαίνεται οὖσα), on which see Dixsaut 1991, 400 n. 331.

from this perspective, but other dialogues, more or less explicitly, endorse its conclusion that “the soul is the human being” (ἡ ψυχὴ ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, 130c3). In this vein, the *Phaedo* displays a remarkable permeability between “us” and “our souls”, a permeability that grounds the continuity between the quoted passage and the immediately following narrative. In fact, this continuity seems stronger than in Plato’s other myths, since some of the actions of the souls are not only similar to human actions, but are explicitly connected to the previous human life. I will now focus only on this connection, without analyzing the complex myth that includes various layers of physical reality and a variety of living beings, including the enigmatic humans with a superior natural constitution who inhabit the true earth (111a4–5).⁵²

The basic logic of the eschatological myths consists in emphasizing the importance of the soul’s moral agency. In the *Phaedo* and other dialogues, Socrates insists that having in sight “the whole time” of the soul’s existence should sustain our moral efforts during the short time of our human existence. The longer view thus *reinforces* the importance of this brief temporal interval: our (or the soul’s) behavior here is decisive for the quality of the soul’s much longer afterlife. In most cases, it even determines what kind of body the soul will inhabit in its next incarnation. On the large scale of life in the universe, paradoxically, it is the failure of countless souls to incarnate or reincarnate in the human form that determines the perfection of the whole as containing many living species (a situation that I will discuss in sufficient detail in Chapter 4). If we keep our focus on the individual soul and the different paradigms of human life, the myth of the *Phaedo* places greater emphasis on the purifying punishments and rewards that it projects on a scale proportional to the physical beauty and simplicity of their allotted cosmic environment. This overall arrangement ascribes to the souls what looks like degrees of embodiment, an idea as ethically appealing as it would be theoretically puzzling. To take a closer look at this puzzle, we need to understand what the souls do or what is done to them in their respective places. Although the correspondence between the purity of the soul and the purity of its postmortem environment appears much earlier in the dialogue (see 69c3–d2), the myth gives it a truly nuanced treatment that merits our full attention. Following the relevant parts of Socrates’s tale, I will

52 On the myth’s cosmography or geography, see, besides studies on particular issues, the general account in Robin 1983, LXVIII–LXXXII, Pender 2012, 208–223, and Gee 2020, 256–271.

arrange the destiny of souls from the bottom up, starting with the lowest and ending with the greatest degree of purity.⁵³

The first thing to note is that the whole scale is framed by two extremes, both of which imply that some souls will be exempt from further incarnations. These are clearly meant to be rare cases. We will come to the positive case at the end of this overview, so we need to begin with how the myth portrays the fate of those incurably bad souls whose punishment will continue *ad infinitum* and cannot have a cathartic function (113e1–6). In contrast to *Gorgias* 525b and *Republic* x, 615c–616a, where such tortures are described as a deterrent to other souls, the fate of these cursed souls serves also more clearly to provide a contrast to the evocation of the purest souls. Not surprisingly, the dwelling place of the latter will be difficult to describe since the degree of imaginability is inversely proportional to the degree of purity. The location of the henceforth eternal punishment, “a lower part of Tartarus”, on the other hand, is a harsh environment devoid of any softness, in short an utterly inhuman landscape of vast geological forces such as lava fields and “frighteningly desolate” black regions (113b3–c2). But not all souls who fall into the lower Tartarus must remain there forever. After a year, those guilty of various “curable but grave offenses” are cast out along two different subterranean rivers and find themselves at the Acherusian lake (113e6–114a6). There, an astonishing spectacle unfolds that has no parallel in Plato’s other myths:

When their journey brings them alongside the Acherusian lake, here they shout and call, some calling to those they killed, others to those they injured. When they have called to them, they beg and beseech them to let them step out into the lake, and to receive them. If they persuade them (καὶ ἐὰν μὲν πείσωσιν), out they step and their evils are over, but, if not, they are sent to Tartarus again, and from there back into the rivers. And this does not stop happening to them until they persuade those they wronged (πρὶν ἂν πείσωσιν οὓς ἠδίκησαν). For this is the punishment imposed on them by the jurors. (114a6–b6)

53 As previously stated, my focus will be on the souls rather than the specific locations of rewards and punishments. See Edmonds 111 2004, 207–219, for more on these locations in relation to previous poetic tradition. Pender 2012, 215–217, Trépanier 2021, 15–20, and Gee 2020, 256–271, also discuss the correspondences between the souls’ previous deeds and their habitats during the afterlife.

In this scene, the souls and “their” previous humans are perfectly continuous, apparently on the assumption that, at their core, the human being *is* their soul. This continuity is emotional, for without emotions, there would be no suffering, and the very idea of punishment would make no sense. Moreover, the souls on either side of the divide remember each other and are able to express their emotions discursively. Finally, it is assumed that they deliberate and make a choice. Of course, there is also deliberation and choice in the afterlife in *Republic* x, where the souls choose their next human or inhuman lives, but here we are dealing with a power over *another* soul’s incarnation, or, more precisely, with the power to decide between the other soul’s new incarnation or its ongoing suffering in Tartarus. The new incarnation is then a consequence of being forgiven, not the aim of the act of forgiveness, which aims at ending the perpetrator’s punishment. In itself, the situation is similar to the provision established in *Laws* ix, 869e, where the absolution of an involuntary murderer is evoked as an *alternative* to a one-year penalty, not as a viable option that can be used *after* a year. In both cases, Plato probably models his account on the Athenian private law, which allowed the relatives of a victim to grant the perpetrator their “grand pardon” (αἰδεσις).⁵⁴ The projection in the afterlife means that not the relatives but victims themselves can, but need not, absolve the perpetrators. The fact that they are “only” souls changes nothing in the matter.

In sum, the possibility of forgiveness has three different implications. First, there are souls whose fate is not fully determined and whose place in the afterlife is not firmly decided right after the death of a human being. Second, the fate of some souls is left to the moral agency of another soul. Third, this agency thus intervenes in the cycle of reincarnations. On this last point, it should be added that we are not told what reincarnation awaits the pardoned souls. Most likely, they retain some of their wickedness since another soul’s mercy is hardly enough to reassign them to the presumably large group of souls who can be described as mediocre or lukewarm and who are “found to have lived average lives” (δόξωσι μέσως βεβιωκέναι, 113d4). They spend time around lake Acheron, where they are either purified by presumably milder punishments or rewarded for good deeds. Although *Socrates* does not say much about this group, it seems that neither their misdeeds nor their right actions were of much consequence, certainly not enough to send them to different locations.

54 On αἰδεσις, see Todd 2003, 216. On the similarity between the *Phaedo* and the *Laws*, see Mackenzie 1981, 228–229. For a summary of various problems implied in the curable villains’ plea for acquittal, see Dorter 1982, 172, and Dixsaut 1991, 406 n. 92.

We now know what happens to bad and average souls. The bad souls suffer lonely punishments or ask for forgiveness, which they are or are not granted by other souls, apparently including the indifferent ones. So what about the good souls? At the beginning of his myth, Socrates made it clear that their path in the afterlife was straighter than that of other souls, a situation that neatly prolongs different paths through human life. As a result, each pure soul “receives gods as companions and as guides alike, and then dwells in the region appropriate to it” (108c4–5). Socrates then gives a detailed description of the true earth and all its wonders, so that we may understand the purity of this earth and its ether. It is only six Stephanus pages later that Socrates speaks explicitly about the good souls, of which there are also two kinds:

But as for all those who are found to have lived exceptionally pious lives, they are the ones who are freed and separated from these regions inside the earth, as if from prisons, enter the pure dwelling above (ἄνω δὲ εἰς τὴν καθαρὰν οἶκῃσιν ἀφικνούμενοι), and make their dwelling on the earth’s surface (καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς οἰκίζόμενοι). And of these, those who purified themselves sufficiently with philosophy live thereafter entirely without bodies (ἄνευ τε σωμάτων ζῶσι τὸ παράπαν), and enter dwellings fairer still than these, although making visible (δηλῶσαι) these dwellings is not easy, nor is there sufficient time in the present circumstances. (114b5–c6)

It should not surprise us that this summary is devoid of any particular activity; typically, the closer we get to what is ultimately good, the smaller the variety of imaginable options. When we reach the two highest levels of the ascetic ascent, our imagination naturally has less material to work with. However, even though neither the pious nor the philosophical souls are described as doing or suffering something, the pious souls are clearly in harmony with their environment as described under the label of the true earth, the surface of which is now their dwelling. This region of the universe with its many wonders was described in a remarkable detail at 110c–111c, where Socrates insisted on the presence of many human beings on the same surface where the pious souls arrive (cf. ἐπ’ αὐτῇ at 111a4 and ἐπὶ γῆς at 114c2).

The situation of pious souls induces a peculiar ambiguity unlike anything we know from Plato’s other myths: the second best of the souls previously incarnated in our bodies, which are prone to diseases and decay, will dwell among human beings with better bodies who are “free of illness and live for a much longer time than the people here” (111b2–4). These enigmatic

humans are not immortal; they just live better lives than we do. Hence the question: do their souls, which are accustomed to purer bodies, continue to occupy the same locations after they leave their better bodies? This outcome seems logical since Socrates mentions no crimes such people would commit, but they are not characterized as philosophers either. To put their souls on par with pious souls who come from our part of the universe seems natural, including the fact that piety is rewarded not only by beautiful surroundings, but by the enjoyment of direct encounters with gods (111b9–c1). This last point is part of this region's perfected epistemic conditions: the better humans on the surface of the true earth have access to the nature of things through their senses, since "the sun and moon and celestial bodies are seen by them as they really are, and their happiness in other ways too is in keeping with all this" (111c1–3). In this situation, no puzzles similar to those that motivated Socrates' hypothesis of Forms arise, since the nature of things there is, for all intents and purposes, epistemically transparent.

One can legitimately wonder how to connect this description of the good souls in purer regions to the recollection argument. Is recollection the privilege of the good souls and is it ultimately grounded in a perfected variety of sense experience that only the true earth can offer? The text offers no answer to such questions, which confirms that Socrates' tale is, first and foremost, a cosmographic projection of an ethical ideal whose sensuous appeal represents the proximity of pious souls to divine beauty. So are the implied degrees of corporeal refinement merely a descriptive strategy in the service of the ethical goal, or does Socrates invite us to ponder the possibility that there are different kinds of corporeality as such? The next chapter will present a detailed examination of this question, but we can already emphasize that even the only souls that "live thereafter entirely without bodies" preserve a dwelling place, one of which Socrates offers no description beyond the claim that it is even more beautiful than the wonderful one of the pious souls: it is a dwelling that is extremely difficult but apparently not impossible to visualize (see the use of the verb δηλώω, "to make visible", at 114c6).

It should be noted that the above-quoted differentiation between pious souls and the souls purified by philosophy is unique and does not appear anywhere else in the *Phaedo*. At 80e–81a, even philosophical purification is rewarded by dwelling with the gods (now a reward for pious souls), and nothing suggests such a difference at 115d, where Socrates evokes "his" destiny, and where the expression τινὰς εὐδαιμονίας at 115d4 echoes τὴν ἄλλην εὐδαιμονίαν at 111c2–3. Similarly, the recollection argument spoke about the souls "separated from bodies" (χωρίς σωμάτων, 76c12), but if recollection is *not* the exclusive province of philosophers, this could point to any kind of

separation from our earthly and visible body. The variable distance from our common human corporeality is therefore not introduced by a philosophical argument but by correlation with the regions that the souls inhabit after our death.

Two ways of dealing with the resulting picture have been suggested. First, it has been argued that the degrees of disembodiment represent the degrees of intellectual approximation to perfect bodiless purity. "Although the aether dwellers are still incarnated," says David Sedley, "their condition is deliberately presented as a close approximation to disembodiment." Indeed, their life "emerges as a didactic device, approximating to philosophical disembodiment although still intelligible by analogy with our familiar incarnate existence." Only "the final stage of disembodiment is left largely to our imagination."⁵⁵ In this way, the myth of the *Phaedo* complements the "essential immortality", which is the same for each individual soul, not with the "earned immortality" but with the earned *bodilessness* granted to philosophical souls who, from a certain moment, would live "entirely without bodies".⁵⁶ Such a life can be understood as a life of uninterrupted epistemic privilege, with full, direct access to the equally incorporeal objects of thought, or as an ultimate allegory of moral purity that underpins our effort at pursuing a philosophical life. For a true Platonist, these two options should presumably merge into one.

This perspective is fully justified in the context of Socrates' hope, which permeates the whole dialogue. At the same time, it leaves intact the puzzle of the soul's nature and its relation to corporeal being, a category arguably broader than that of our earthly and visible bodies. Hence the second reading of the myth that invites us to accept that, except for the philosophical souls in their undescribed dwelling, the souls that have left our part of the universe and its visible corporeality are nevertheless not entirely incorporeal. No Platonic text contradicts such a reading, and the *Phaedo* itself makes the sufferings or joys of the souls most vivid, so much so that Elizabeth Pender, in her careful but creative reading of the myth, suggests that, in the afterlife, the souls acquire bodies whose nature corresponds to that of their environment. In this way, the soul is "separated from its individual

55 All quotations are from Sedley 1989, 378.

56 This conclusion is not the one reached in Sedley 2009, who introduces the distinction between "essential" and "earned" immortality but looks for the latter in other texts and contexts. Still, I think that Sedley 1989 allows us to apply his distinction in this way. For brief but relevant remarks on the issue, see Trépanier 2021, 18–19. Obdrzalek 2021 deals with other passages of the *Phaedo*.

human body but still trapped in physical nature,” where its present state derives from the “super-body” of Tartarus or transforms into the “better golden-age” body appropriate to its sojourn on the surface of the true earth. Tartarus thus becomes “the very engine of physical generation” and the whole underworld region can be seen “as a ‘super-body’ for the corrupted souls.”⁵⁷ However, even on this interpretation, the myth is unclear about the exact relation between individual souls and corporeality as derived from their entrapment in the regions composed of the same four elements as the world around us. The souls’ afterlife dwellings convey little information about the nature of the soul as such. Instead, they are analogical to the incarnations in a visible body, and this analogy is reinforced by the fact that the new environmental bodies also reflect the souls’ previous history. Once again, the ontology of the soul gives way to the myth’s ethical message. And if this message still requires a sort of corporeality, the latter is as puzzling as it is necessary.

All this is why Socrates’ myth makes us see more clearly the fundamental point: if it describes only *some* but not other souls as “entirely without bodies”, then this description cannot become part of a stable, unambiguous ontology of the soul and its nature. What happens in the *Phaedo* is a prolonged oscillation between the soul as epistemic agent and the soul as moral agent. The descriptions that correspond to these complementary perspectives tend unavoidably to turn away from the body in the epistemological context and to focus on the ills of the body in the ethical context. Moreover, they both presuppose but do not clarify the soul’s independent capacity to animate visible bodies. As a result, none of the particular descriptions is transformed into a proper definition of the soul or into an account of its nature that would reach beyond the catalogue of the soul’s actions and passions. In this respect, there is no real difference between the eschatological myth and the other parts of the dialogue. On the contrary, the entire dialogue consistently demonstrates that the more person-like the soul becomes, the easier it is to intuitively grasp its actions and their consequences. In other words, the more the soul resembles a person, the better it performs a variety of actions that cannot be fully derived from either the objects of pure knowledge or the naturalistic views on causation.

To put it even more clearly: it is precisely through the persistent effort to purify the soul while at the same time reinforcing its own identity that the *Phaedo* confirms that “agency” is a primitive concept assumed without

57 Pender 2012, 220.

explicit definition but present behind all the descriptions of what the soul does and of what it can endure. The series of different arguments, of which this chapter has presented a sample, brings to the fore the irreducibility of the Platonic notion of “soul”, a notion that makes sense only insofar as the soul becomes an agent that takes on the features of a self or a person. From its first to its last argument, followed by the myth of the afterlife, the *Phaedo* sculpts the soul as an acting individual.

The wide range of resulting actions shows a true diversity, starting with the important difference between the soul as a causal force that brings life to the body (and cannot refrain from doing so) and the soul as a causal agent that deliberately intervenes or refrains from intervening in various states of affairs. The roles of a causal force and a causal agent are the domain of the soul (indeed, the role of a causal agent belongs *only* to the soul), yet their accounts are irreducibly different, not in the least because the agency of the soul is easily or even inevitably personified, which is not the case with the soul as the animating causal force. True agency is part of the nature of the soul as an individual, which does not exist to a degree and, unlike the Forms as causes, is not accompanied by its polar opposite. Precisely this may be why, as the next chapter will demonstrate in detail, Plato never offers a true account of an entirely incorporeal soul.

Soul and Incorporeality

1 Setting the Problem

The incorporeality of the soul counts among the well-attested Platonic doctrines, as do the soul's immortality and its self-moving nature. "According to Plato, the soul is an incorporeal, self-moving substance," says the Pseudo-Galen in his *Medical Definitions* XIX, 355 (Kühn), thus summing up two of these three fundamental characteristics.¹ "The soul is an incorporeal essence, unchanging in its substance and intelligible, and invisible, and uniform," states Alcinous in his *Handbook of Platonism* 25, 1 (Whittaker, trans. Dillon 1993), adding invisibility and simplicity to the list.

These summaries imply a thought-provoking question that Plato never directly asks, let alone answers: how seamlessly can incorporeality connect with each soul's individual agency, which is a prerequisite for the soul's moral life in the human body and for its role in the cosmos at large? The aim of this chapter is to revisit this question by taking seriously Plato's reluctance to describe the soul, human or not, as being entirely without a body of any kind. I am *not*, therefore, contesting the obvious fact that Plato treats souls as essentially distinct from bodies. Rather, I am interested in why the assumption of incorporeality is not given detailed argumentative support.² The truth is that no dialogue presents the premise – or indeed the

¹ Perhaps symptomatically, two manuscripts of *Definitiones medicae* have σώματος instead of ἀσώματος, but the editorial choice of the latter leaves no doubt. See the critical apparatus in Kollesch 2023, 16.

² Hence also the absence of a definition of the term "incorporeal". In the narrow sense, I take for "incorporeal" what is not composed of physical stuff (i.e., of the four elements), but is indivisible, dimensionless and not spatially located; therefore, it exists entirely without a composite body. This narrow sense fits the Platonic Forms (certainly those in the *Phaedo*). As we shall see, not even the *Phaedo* applies it directly to the soul. The problem for any reader of the dialogues follows from the fact that the authorities quoted in the previous paragraph do not indicate whether they have in mind this austere definition or incline towards what I would call a broad definition that *also* takes for incorporeal what is *capable* of existing without a body but *can* be both tridimensional and mobile (see Sections 5 and 6 on the *Timaeus* and *Laws* x). In ancient philosophy, especially after the Stoics, the technical debates about the term "incorporeal" and its range concern mostly abstract entities with no *agency* of the kind that Plato ascribes to the soul. On the use of the term "incorporeal" in ancient authors, including its variability in Plato, see Gomperz

conclusion – that the soul is entirely bodiless. This option is suggested in *Laws* x and in the *Sophist*, and also in the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*, but even the latter says only that the soul “could possibly” be such, and both *Laws* x and the *Sophist* leave us without a clear final statement about the soul’s incorporeality. My suggestion is that the reason for this reluctance is methodological: it follows from the variety of roles that Plato ascribes to the soul, including its actions and experiences in the afterlife. These actions and experiences have an essential moral dimension that connects to the soul’s activity of thinking but also translates into the description of the soul as an individual agent. This may be why the arguments in favor of this agent’s immortality never take incorporeality as their starting point but always assume that the thinking soul is also a natural self-mover. As such, the soul is a fundamental, irreducible feature of reality. Its natural agency can then be approached in a way that is ontologically neutral, which is precisely why this approach can never be exhausted by a narrower quest for exact definition.

To assume that the soul’s agency precedes its explicit ontology is not, of course, to argue against the basic view of Plato as a dualist (see below for a refinement of this label). Instead, I wish to imply, more modestly, that Plato’s understanding of the soul as distinct from both the sensible bodies and the incorporeal entities such as the Forms makes it difficult to avoid ambiguities that mark the soul’s proper nature. The problem is also related to the lack of a general definition of “body” in Plato: such a definition cannot be replaced by opposing the soul to both the visible and the elemental bodies (nor by acknowledging that, in these two groups of bodies, the former do not obtain without the latter).³ All this is typical of Plato’s discourse about the soul, regardless of which group of dialogues we focus on. The absence of an explicit attribution of incorporeality to the soul is usually evoked in connection with the so-called later dialogues, but the situation is similar in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* x. Again, my intention is not to argue *against* the soul’s incorporeality, but to show that, even in these dialogues,

1932 and Renehan 1980. On the language of corporeality and incorporeality in Plato, see Campbell 2022a, 431–434.

3 *Philebus* 29d7–8 comes closest to a definition when it says that we call “body” the four elements “combined into a unit” (εἰς ἓν συγκαίμενα). On this point, cf. Campbell 2022a, 431. The “unit” mentioned here is clearly the visible and tangible body (cf. *Laws* x, 894a). But Plato’s elements are also bodies, although we experience them as mixtures; see Bodnár 2008. For a broad range of studies about the concept of the body in (not only) Plato, see Buchheim, Meissner, Wachsmann 2016.

the bodiless state is introduced as a moral ideal rather than as an ontological feature of the soul.⁴ Simply put, the idea of incorporeality sustains the soul's immortality as motivated by ethical concerns relevant to an individual soul. It is the latter that features in the stories about rewards and punishments, stories that make it move through the physical universe (in the previous chapter, we saw this to be the case in the *Phaedo*). This ethical individuation of souls is crucial for Plato's images of the souls that are without human bodies yet behave in human-like ways. Indeed, if the immortal soul retains its agency and its particular place within the universe, it is difficult to reduce its activity to pure thinking or to a geometrically determined motion. Hence the subtle but important difference between Plato and the later Platonists, who are explicit about the soul's incorporeality and comparatively less inclined to portray the soul's immortality in terms of its personal story.

In order to show how Plato separates the soul from the body while refraining from ascribing to it an unqualified incorporeality, I will therefore begin with the soul's immortality in the *Phaedo*, focusing on the so-called "affinity argument", where Plato comes close to, but then shies away from, directly affirming that the soul is incorporeal. In Sections 3 and 4, I will turn to *Republic* x and the *Phaedrus* as further texts which deal in some significant detail with the nature and immortality of the soul. Section 5 will summarize the soul's status in the *Timaeus*. Section 6 will deal with *Laws* x and a passage from the *Sophist*, whose broader focus is on the notional dialogue between the materialists and the "friends of Forms". In a sketchy yet revealing way, this dialogue touches upon the place of the soul in their respective ontologies. The chapter's Conclusion will sum up Plato's avoidance of positing the soul as simply incorporeal and suggest some further philosophical reasons for this reluctance.

4 On the later dialogues, see, e.g., Sorabji 2002. Carone 2005a takes issue with "a shared assumption that in the late dialogues the mind itself must be immaterial" (227). For a brief assessment of this view, see Conclusion of this chapter. In what follows, I must leave aside the supposedly sharp contrast between the Platonic soul's incorporeality and the soul in the pre-Platonic authors. For nuanced remarks on incorporeality in the latter, see Curd 2009 and 2013.

2 The *Phaedo*

For good reasons, the *Phaedo* is considered to be *the* forge of the Platonic soul as incorporeal and immortal. However, if immortality is discussed from different angles, the same is not true of incorporeality. What we learn about the soul itself is framed by Socrates' initial assumption that what we call "soul" is separable from the visible and tangible body. As a result, death is described as "nothing other than the soul's separation from the body", so that there is, on the one hand, the soul by itself (τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτὴν καθ' αὐτήν) separated from the body, and on the other hand, the body by itself (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα) separated from the soul (64c4–8).⁵ This remarkably objective description implies the ontological distinctness of body and soul but adds nothing about their own natures.⁶ Instead, Socrates will use this distinctness to argue in favor of the superiority of the *activity* that belongs to the soul rather than the body. This argument expresses and promotes the vantage point of philosophers as those who place an incomparably higher value on what the soul does: instead of focusing on the body that impedes the acquisition of wisdom (τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτήσιν), a philosopher focuses the soul and its reasoning (λογίζεσθαι), which alone can discover something real (τι τῶν ὄντων) (65a9–c3). As we saw already in the previous chapter, this connection between epistemology and ethics is what frames the entire course of the dialogue, whose main ambition is to justify Socrates' hope (ἐλπίς) that, once separated from the body, the soul will be granted access to a better kind of life (67b7–c3). This is the main reason why the philosophers "desire to have their soul by itself" (αὐτὴν δὲ καθ' αὐτὴν ἐπιθυμοῦσι τὴν ψυχὴν ἔχειν, 67e7–8).⁷

5 Only at 66a1–2, αὐτὴ καθ' αὐτήν is employed about the Forms as objects of thought inaccessible to the senses. The quoted characterization of death reminds us that the expression "itself by itself", apparently coined by Plato (see Ebrey 2017, 15 n. 33; cf. Broackes 2009), is not used only as a technical idiom proper to the Forms. The text of the *Phaedo* I use is Rowe 1993; Long's translation from Sedley and Long 2011 is often modified.

6 For some ancients, it is precisely with this laconic characterization of death that the problem starts. I am thinking of Chrysippus who, according to Nemesius, reconstructs Socrates' reasoning as contradictory: "death is the separation of soul from body; now nothing incorporeal is separated from body; for neither is there anything incorporeal attached to body; now the soul is both attached to body and separated from it (ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ καὶ ἐφάπτεται καὶ χωρίζεται τοῦ σώματος); therefore the soul is not incorporeal" (Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 11, 22, 3–6 [= SVF 2.790], trans. Sharples and van der Eijk). The *Phaedo* is not named, but the reference is obvious.

7 Here I touch on what the previous chapter discussed in more detail.

This framework of the coming arguments in favor of the soul's immortality must be taken seriously in all that it says but also in all that it omits to specify, namely the proper nature of the soul once it is separated from the body. In fact, of the arguments that follow, the much-maligned argument based on the affinity between the soul and the Forms is the only one that pays more attention not to what the soul does, but to what it is. But even the affinity argument ends up by saying what the soul is *like*, so that the result is reminiscent of the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates explains the soul's immortality through "what it does and what is done to it" (πάθη τε καὶ ἔργα, 245c3), and then shies away from saying "what the soul actually is" and speaks instead "about its form" (περὶ δὲ τῆς ἰδέας αὐτῆς, 246a3; see Section 4 below). Methodologically speaking, and despite the very different aim and the different setting of both dialogues, the problem is much the same: what exactly is the soul that performs the actions that reach beyond the states of our visible and tangible body?

Before concentrating on the affinity argument, we must bear in mind that the other arguments in favor of the soul's immortality proceed either from the perspective of thought or from the perspective of motion.⁸ Let me start with the latter, which is dominant in both the first and the last arguments. Concerning the first (or "cyclical") argument, its admitted failure follows precisely from its inclusion of the soul in the all-encompassing process of natural change (see 70d7–e1).⁹ No matter how we interpret the detail and scope of this argument, it clearly puts the soul in some location that cannot be merely metaphorical. Socrates may keep a distance from the "ancient saying" about Hades, namely "that souls exist there which have come from here" (ὥς εἰσὶν ἐνθὲνδε ἀφικόμεναι ἐκεῖ), and that it is from there that they return here (70c6–7), but his generalized version of this reasoning maintains the premise of the soul's local motion. Insofar as his description of the two-way process of generation results in the necessity to counterbalance death by rebirth, conceived as a return of the numerically same souls, it actually reinforces the role of the soul as a real agent implied in the physical world where it moves from one place to another (this is framed by the eloquent

8 In this and the next three paragraphs, I summarize some issues implied in the passages that were analyzed in detail in the previous chapter, Sections 3 and 4. However, this summary is not meant to be a simple repetition.

9 For an analysis of this topic-neutral change, see Sedley 2012. Here I leave aside the polemics, going back to Olympiodorus, as to whether or not this argument aims at establishing the soul's complete immortality. On this issue, see O'Brien 1968, 96–97, Barnes 1978 and Gallop 1982. Cf. also some remarks in Chapter 4.1.

anti-entropic conclusion at 72a11–d3, on which see Chapter 4.1). It is therefore noticeable that the dialogue's last proof still assumes this basic scheme. Socrates' description of how "the soul comes to Hades" (107d2–3) and how it travels "from here to there" and then back again (107e1–3), stems from his insistence on the soul's ability to "run away" from approaching death: what is immortal in human being, goes away and "leaves its place to death" (ὑπεκχωρήσαν τῷ θανάτῳ, 106e7).

We could debate whether the verb ὑπεκχωρεῖν is used as a metaphor, but any decision in this matter is complicated by the fact that Socrates applies this verb to both physical and non-physical entities: at 102d8–9, it relates to the Form which cannot suffer its opposite, while at 103d8, it is used about the snow "retiring" from the incoming heat.¹⁰ So, metaphor or not, if the soul is to retain its agency and its capacity to enjoy its rewards and suffer its pains, we cannot help imagining that its capacity to leave behind the visible and tangible body is a prerequisite for reaching the colorful elsewhere, which the myth vividly depicts as a physical location.¹¹ This continuity between the way the soul is treated in the final proof and the way it is described in the subsequent myth confirms that, in these pages, neither the soul's immortality nor its indestructibility is connected to its incorporeality (in the next section, we will see that the same is true of the complementary argument in *Republic* x).

None of this amounts to a denial of the soul's incorporeality. But to avoid discussing the latter, especially on the basis of a full-fledged theoretical dualism, makes it easier for Socrates to keep his focus simply on what the soul does. In this respect, the final argument of the dialogue, together with the myth that follows it, illustrate well the double bind that obliges Socrates to paint the soul as an agent that literally animates the body, but also as a moral agent that seeks to withdraw from the body it animates. If, therefore, the description of the soul's survival in terms of "retreating" or "leaving its place" perpetuates the physicalist undertones due to the analogy with snow and fire,¹² Socrates is willing to pay this price in order to preserve the

10 On these metaphors as describing change, or the lack thereof, see O'Brien 1967, 203–208, and O'Brien 1977.

11 Damascius (*Phaed.* 1.503 Westerink 1977) reports two puzzling exceptions to this view: Platonist Democritus says that the "true earth" is a Form, while Plutarch says that it is Nature. See Gertz 2011, 178–179.

12 Symmetrically, the soul's return to the body can be expressed in terms of a military-like occupation; see ψυχή ἄρα ὅτι ἂν αὐτὴ κατὰσχη at 105d3. Burnet 1911, 123, insists that this is a "simple military metaphor" that "implies no metaphysical theory."

broader ethical continuity that presides over the dialogue as a whole. In the myth, this ethical horizon is confirmed at 114b–c, where the punishments or rewards of souls, and hence their place in the scheme of the “true earth”, relate to their variously successful purification of desire. Socrates’ conclusion that “those who purified themselves sufficiently with philosophy live thereafter entirely without bodies” (ἄνευ τε σωμάτων τὸ παράπαν, 114c3–4) is not a general ontological statement. At this point in the story, all souls are without human or animal bodies, but the phrase “entirely without bodies” is meant to evoke the soul’s dwelling places (οἰκήσεις) that are too difficult to describe on this occasion. At the same time, Socrates’ caveat concerning the accuracy of his limited description casts no doubt on “the soul’s own adornment (τῷ αὐτῆς κόσμῳ), namely temperance, justice, courage, freedom and truth” (114e5–115a1). No doubt these qualities are incorporeal but, since all qualities *as qualities* are such, their list cannot reveal anything new about the soul’s ontology (in the simplest sense of what the soul must be like in order to be able to do what Socrates asks of it).

As a result, the final pages of the dialogue do not resolve the ambiguity that arises from the definition of death as the separation of the soul from the body: is it a separation from the body of the visible and tangible kind, or is it a process that implies, on the part of the soul, a truly unqualified incorporeality? As I said already, this ambiguity is reinforced by the absence of any explicit definition of “body”. But even in the absence of such a definition, it is remarkable that the problem is not resolved in the only argument in the *Phaedo*, which avoids describing the soul as either an epistemic or a moral agent and, instead, addresses the nature of the soul and its fundamental properties more directly than any other argument on offer.

The so-called “affinity argument” is therefore important for our issue, regardless of its success or failure at establishing the soul’s immortality.¹³ Since the argument addresses the fear that the soul simply dissipates when it leaves the body (70a, 77b, 77d–e), its starting point consists of two straightforward questions:

What kind of thing (τῷ ποίῳ τινί), I mean, is such that it is proper to it (προσήκει) to suffer the dissipation, and what kind of thing is not like

13 I retain this argument’s traditional label, but “kinship argument” is an equally fitting name. It is used in Ebrey 2023, 131–161, who offers an original analysis of the argument (and the dialogue) as a whole, including the status of the Forms. My reading is narrower since my main topic is the limit of the simplicity of the soul. On the argument itself, cf. also Apolloni 1996, Elton 1997, Strobel 2011, and Cornelli 2019.

that? And should we then consider to which kind soul belongs (καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο αὖ ἐπισκέψασθαι πότερον [ἢ] ψυχὴ ἐστίν), and on that basis be confident or fearful on behalf of our own soul? (78b5–9)

A careful reading of these introductory questions makes us realize that, even here, Socrates avoids asking directly, “what is the soul?” or “what kind of thing is the soul?” The proposed approach is oblique: let us first define what can and cannot dissipate, and then see into which category the soul belongs. The answer will be unsatisfactory on the question of immortality, but highly revealing nonetheless: the soul belongs to neither kind entirely, but is *closer to* the kind that, being truly unchangeable, cannot dissipate. To understand what motivates such an ambiguous conclusion, we need to follow the argument’s progress from its initial distinction of two kinds of things to what exactly it says about the soul as such. In this last respect, it is also important to take into account the fact that the argument reaches its formal conclusion at 80b, but four more pages explain its implications not for the soul’s ontology, but, again, for its moral development.

In order to combat the fear of the soul’s dissipation, Socrates introduces a polarity between what “has been put together and is naturally composite,” and what “is actually incomposite;” to the former, it is proper (προσήκει) to be unmade in the inversion of its composition, to the latter it is proper (προσήκει) to escape all division (78c1–4). Because it expresses a likelihood rather than axiomatic certainty, the verb προσήκειν modulates the argument right from the start.¹⁴ Socrates then expands the properties of what is incomposite from being indivisible to also being “always in the same state and condition” (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτα καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχει), which implies that the composite things “are in different conditions at different times and are never in the same state” (78c6–8). Even in these lines, Socrates remains cautious: it is “most likely” (μάλιστα εἰκός) that it is so. The reason for this reluctance is not spelled out, but it probably stems primarily from the rather uncertain status of bodies. Since we have no definition of what exactly a body is, but can characterize it as “itself by itself” (64c6), all general statements about

14 Borrowed from the initial question (78b5), this verb frames the whole argument since Socrates repeats it at 80b in the much discussed concluding sentence that I will analyze below. Rowe 1991, 464–465, takes προσήκειν to imply that Socrates is not offering a rigorous proof, but advances “good reasons” for his view of the soul.

bodies seem to require some qualification.¹⁵ In contrast, Socrates' example of the incomposite things, the Forms, will meet with Cebes' unqualified approval: it is *necessary* (ἀνάγκη) that they remain in the same state and condition (78d8).

The example of Forms is what explicitly connects the present argument to the preceding discussion. At 78d1–7, the Forms such as the Equal or the Beautiful stand for all “essence itself (αὐτὴ ἡ οὐσία), to which we confer being in our questions and answers,” and which is always in the same condition and state. The Equal or the Beautiful are thus among the linguistically expressed objects of thought, each one being by itself (μονοειδὲς ὃν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό) without suffering any kind of change whatsoever. The contrast with the changing things that occur as many is easy to establish (78d10–e6) but it adds nothing new to the overall argument: the distinction between the Forms such as the Equal or the Beautiful and many equal or beautiful things serves only to illustrate the already established polarity of the incomposite and the composite things. The important shift, therefore, comes in the next step, where Socrates expresses this polarity in terms of sense-perception and its limits. Whereas the changeable things can be touched, seen, or perceived with other senses, the things that never change are “unseen and not visible” (ἀίδη καὶ οὐχ ὁρατά), and can only be grasped by our discursive reasoning (τῷ τῆς διανοίας λογισμῷ) (79a1–4).

At this point, Socrates does not offer an argument that would independently establish that the things that change are necessarily perceptible, whereas those that do not change in any way can never be perceived. What he uses instead is a generalized appeal to experience that allows him to associate the soul with the incomposite and unchangeable beings without, however, identifying it as one of them. This crucial connection is established in two nontrivial steps. First, Socrates rephrases the basic polarity of “two kinds of beings” (δύο εἶδη τῶν ὄντων) in terms of the visible as opposed to the invisible (τὸ μὲν ὁρατόν, τὸ δὲ ἀίδές) (79a6–7). Second, he reiterates that “we ourselves are the body on the one hand and the soul on the other hand” (ἡμῶν αὐτῶν τὸ μὲν σῶμά ἐστι, τὸ δὲ ψυχή), and then redistributes this polarity along the *scale* of the visible and the invisible (79b1–17). It is, then, this redistribution that yields the final result: if the body is like the visible being, then the soul *must* be more similar (ὁμοιότερον) and more akin (συγγενέστερον) to the opposite pole of the scale (79d10–e8).

15 At 80c9–d2, we will learn that the embalmed bodies stay “almost whole for an unimaginably long time, and even if the body rots, certain parts of it – bones, sinews and all such things – are still practically immortal” (ὅμως ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀθάνατά ἐστιν).

Many previous readers have analyzed the minutiae of this conclusion, often expressing their unease at Socrates' use of comparatives ὁμοιότερον and συγγενέστερον, which prepare the awkward conclusion that the soul is the sort of thing that is "altogether incapable of being disintegrated, or nearly so" (80b9–10).¹⁶ Still, the comparatives, which express the shift from the original clean-cut polarity of the incomposite and the composite things to the scale that admits of degrees, are of central importance for preserving the connection between the nature of the soul and the *activity* of philosophy. Simply put, it is the comparatives, and thus the implied *scale* of incorporeality, that create the interval where the soul can meaningfully exercise philosophy as self-purification, which is, logically, a kind of change.

Without *this* kind of change, nothing in the *Phaedo* would make much sense. Seen in this light, the argument at 78–79 fails to make the soul incorporeal in the same sense as the Forms, but this is necessary insofar as the soul needs its own ground, so to speak, where it thinks the Forms and acts accordingly. In this way, the argument preserves a rationale for philosophy as a means of moral improvement. That the soul's purity gets compromised in the process is a condition of striving to purify it: the incorporeal Forms are not only the soul's proper objects of thought, but also what the soul should desire and emulate. In a more general perspective, since Socrates makes incorporeality equivalent to the absence of *all* change, the soul can only approximate such a state if it is to preserve its specific way of life.

The issue of the soul's changeability should therefore be brought to the fore. This happens, but only partially, at 79c–80b. Here the purification of the soul's comes into focus thanks to the contrast between the soul's disordered wandering caused by its attachment to a body (see *πλανᾶται καὶ ταρᾷται* at 79c7) and its attainment of the state when it is "at rest from its wandering" and, grasping the unchangeable beings, in relation to them it "stays always in the same state and condition, because the things it is grasping (*ἐφαπτομένη*) have the same kind of stability" (79d5–7). Yet this stable state, labeled "wisdom" (*φρόνησις*), cannot be absolutely identical with the state of that which it grasps: in order to perpetuate the acquired wisdom, the soul must be *active* and exercise philosophy as described throughout the *Phaedo*. In our passage, this activity translates into the soul's natural

16 On *Phaedo* 78b–79e and its various challenges, see the relevant pages in Gallop 1975, Bostock 1986 and Rowe 1993, and also Rowe 1991 and Apolloni 1996. For an important new analysis of this text, see Ebrey 2023, 136–157. For a careful reading of *Phaedo* 79c, see Cornelli 2019, 25–30, with further references. On the development at 79c–80b, see right below.

government over the body: when the body and the soul are joined together, says Socrates at 79e8–80a5, nature (φύσις) places the former in the position of serving and being the slave, the latter in the position of ruling and being the master. This means that the soul is “similar to the divine” (ὁμοιον τῷ θείῳ εἶναι), because the divine is what by nature rules, while the body is “similar to what is mortal” (τῷ θνητῷ).

Thus we are reminded of the account earlier in the dialogue of the gods as masters over human life and of Socrates’ belief that this relationship extends beyond death (63c). Hence also the insistence that philosophers should emulate the nature of their masters, thereby rendering their souls impervious to the desires of the body (67d with the reminder of death as the separation most keenly rehearsed by the philosopher’s soul).¹⁷ The question is why, at exactly this point, Socrates recalls his image of the gods as our masters. The answer seems clear: the soul’s epistemological relation to the Forms needs to be complemented by its more proactive attitude towards the bodies. To aim at the Forms while keeping the body at bay are two facets of the soul’s activity, each in its own way implying that the soul can be “by itself” and immortal, but it is still changeable, and its changes are translated into its relation with the bodies. The result is too fuzzy to count for the soul’s proper ontology, but, whatever we think about the latter, the soul’s relation to bodies is undoubtedly an original bond: on Socrates’ account, the soul is repeatedly bound to a body, in most cases regardless of the success of its epistemic and moral effort (see Chapter 2.5). This situation, epitomized in the conclusion that the soul is incomposite “or nearly so”, mitigates the tendency of the whole argument toward a strict substantial dualism of body and soul.¹⁸

In this respect, it needs to be emphasized that Socrates ascribes mental and physical properties to the body and the soul alike. He seems equally comfortable speaking of the body as desiring (66c7–8), and of the soul as containing or “having” something heavy and earthy (81c8–9), a corporeal element that, again, is itself capable of desiring (81e1–2).¹⁹ This fits well with

17 On the *Phaedo* as primarily an invitation to such a rehearsal, see Sprague 2007, who can stand for the whole tradition of reading the *Phaedo* from an ethical perspective. For a recent interpretation of the soul’s “kinship with the divine”, especially in relation to the *Phaedo*’s final argument, see Ebrey 2021.

18 On some misconceptions concerning soul and substance dualism in Plato, and especially the *Phaedo*, see, e.g., Broadie 2001, Bortt 2006, Mesch 2016a, Mesch 2016b, Müller 2017, Trabatttoni 2019. See also below on two different kinds of dualism in Plato.

19 See also the use of the term τὸ σωματσειδέξ at 81b5, analyzed in Johansen 2017. Vasilou 2021 cites this passage while arguing in favor of a strong Anaxagorean influence on the

the dialogue's guiding idea that the philosopher, more than other people, "releases his soul as much as possible (μάλιστα) from its communion (κοινωνία) with the body" (65a1–2). Here the separation, attempted while we are alive, is described as a matter of degree, and Socrates never draws a clear line between the body's desires and the soul's desire for the body: they seem to go together and oppose the soul's desire for purification.²⁰ As a result, the whole issue of separation fails to produce a stable ontology of the soul. Here I agree with Thomas Johansen's conclusion that the *Phaedo* "underscores the ontological flexibility of the soul that we find elsewhere in Plato," and with David Bostock's earlier insistence that "we evidently cannot say that the soul never changes" because "it is obvious that the soul is a changing thing, and in this respect is like the body and *not* like the forms."²¹ It is thus an open question whether a true ontology of the soul is possible at all since all we get are different descriptions of its attitudes and actions.

Other dialogues, in which Plato brings together the descriptions of the soul as thinking and as moving, may get us closer to an answer. However, the relevant dialogues will follow the *Phaedo* in *not* applying the notion of incorporeality directly to the soul as an immortal agent. Some texts come close to an improved reuse of Simmias' notion of harmony, which is "invisible, incorporeal, altogether beautiful and divine" (85e5–86a1) but still dependent on its material realization, but this improvement does not build upon Socrates' arguments in the *Phaedo*. Instead, the talk about the soul's "material" becomes more explicit, especially in the *Timaeus*, which describes the constitution of the soul by the demiurge. At the same time, the possibility that souls have some kind of material can be traced back to *Republic* x and the *Phaedrus*.

Phaedo, including the issue of corporeality and incorporeality. I have some difficulty with his suggestion that they can form a mixture. See page 426: "If the soul has become corporeal, even to the point of being visible (81c–d), presumably there must be, as it were, 'incorporeal bits' mixed together with the corporeal bits." This relies on a literal reading of 81c–d. Why, then, not take seriously the fact that the *Phaedo* offers no unqualified description of the soul as incorporeal?

20 My distinction between the soul's aiming at the invisible Forms and its managing of the visible body that it inhabits would thus correspond to the distinction, made in Johansen 2017, 19, between the "intentional" and the "functional" separation: the former "relates to what the philosopher has in mind, what he is thinking about," the latter concerns "what [the soul] does independently of the body." Cf. Woolf 2004, who distinguishes between "evaluative" and "ascetic" attitudes. On the connection between the philosopher's activity and the soul "itself by itself", see also Ebrey 2017, 15–16. For various senses of separation in the *Phaedo*, see Pakaluk 2003.

21 Johansen 2017, 27; Bostock 1986, 119. And see already Gallop 1975, 140–141.

3 *Republic* x

The focus of this section is on the proof of the immortality of the soul in the last book of the *Republic*, a dialogue richer than any other in information about the soul's life in the human body and, by extension, in human society. As in the *Phaedo*, however, we hear much more about what the soul does than about what it is, and extracting from the *Republic* a more articulate ontology of the soul seems difficult in the best of cases. I will not attempt any such reconstruction. Instead, I want to revisit the argument at 608c–612a, the strangeness of which has embarrassed even the most charitable readers.²² What can perhaps be said in favor of this argument is that Plato may here anticipate Strato's objection to the conclusion of the *Phaedo*, namely that Socrates identifies too easily, and perhaps illicitly, the soul's immortality with its indestructibility.²³ On my reading, the proof in *Republic* x, which infers immortality from indestructibility, is complementary to the last proof in the *Phaedo*, where the exact opposite happens. In order to preempt the objection that the soul's immortality (defined through its essential participation in Life) need not guarantee its indestructibility, the latter is brought to the fore in *Republic* x, where Socrates turns to "the greatest rewards and prizes that have been proposed for virtue" (608c1–2). These rewards are first characterized by their duration, which provides a smooth passage to the issue of immortality: as truly great, they requite not "a short time" (ὀλίγος χρόνος), but "the whole of time" (πᾶς χρόνος). And to enjoy something throughout "the whole of time", the soul, of course, needs to be immortal.

For all its strangeness and the necessary qualifications that will have to follow, this temporal distinction serves as a direct introduction to the discovery of what makes the soul immortal. At the same time, as in the *Phaedo*, the ethical horizon of the proof is crucial: from the perspective of the soul, human actions in "a short time" are decisive for the long stretches of time in between incarnations. For this ethical scheme to work, it must be shown that the soul not only survives our death but retains its individuality and agency. As a result, Socrates' argument will provide a strong continuity between the proof of immortality and the following moralizing myth, which, like all eschatological myths, cannot avoid describing souls as persons.²⁴

22 See the quotations in Brown 1997, 211. Brown's is the most thorough defense of the whole demonstration.

23 For the details of Strato's criticism, see Chapter 2.4.

24 For a different angle on this continuity, see Chapter 5.4.

Before such a description, a more abstract line of reasoning has to prepare the ground. This reasoning is based on two general premises. The first one is simple and straightforward: “the bad is what destroys and corrupts, and the good is what preserves and benefits” (608e3–4). The second one, introduced in the form of a question, is less obvious and must be clarified immediately through a series of examples:

And do you say that there is a good and a bad for each thing (ἐκάστω τι)? For example, ophthalmia for the eyes, sickness for the whole body, blight for grain, rot for wood, rust for iron or bronze. In other words, is there, as I say, a natural badness and sickness for almost everything (σχεδὸν πᾶσι σύμφυτον ἐκάστω κακὸν τε καὶ νόσημα)? (608e6–609a4)

Socrates adds that this badness, once it begins to act (ποιεῖν) on something, will first make it worse and then destroy it completely (τελευτῶν). This additional remark seems to be intended to exclude the cases of destruction by a sudden accident: an arrow that hits the eye destroys it no less efficiently than ophthalmia, but can hardly be described as a badness that is connatural to it. Accidents must therefore, rather strangely, be excluded from the argument. Everything, insists Socrates in his next reply, can only be destroyed by its own natural badness (τὸ σύμφυτον κακὸν ἐκάστου) and its own affliction (ἡ πονηρία ἑκάστου); and “if they don’t destroy it, nothing else will crush it (εἰ μὴ τοῦτο ἀπολεῖ, οὐκ ἂν ἄλλο γε αὐτὸ ἔτι διαφθείρειεν), for the good would never destroy anything, nor would anything neither good nor bad” (609a9–b2). Consequently, for each thing, there is something inherently good and something inherently bad, while everything else is indifferent, leaving the thing in question in its present state. This resulting scheme is clear, although it omits not only the possibility of accidental destruction by external causes, but also the fact that material things or bodies undergo a general decay, which is due to their composite nature and is brought about by the passage of time. This omission is due to Socrates’ tight focus on emphasizing that, in general, things are never immune to the dangers inherent in their *particular* constitution.

In his next step, Socrates begins to wonder about the possible exception to this rule. His question does not suggest the possibility of some perfect thing that would be entirely free of any internal flaw. Instead, Socrates evokes something that *would* suffer from its own badness but *not* be ultimately destroyed by it. Such a thing, he concludes, would be “naturally incapable of being destroyed” (τοῦ πεφυκότος οὕτως ὀλεθρὸς οὐκ ἦν, 609b). And it

only takes Glaucon's tentative agreement for Socrates to suggest that we take a look at the soul from precisely this angle.

First, it is clear from everything that has been said in the dialogue so far that the soul *has* its own badness, which comes to it in various forms: the cardinal vices of "injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, and lack of learning" are listed at 609b11–c1 as that many reminders of the fact that the soul's moral qualities are constantly improving or deteriorating. The question, then, is whether this process can lead to the utter disintegration of the soul. Unsurprisingly, Socrates will defend a negative answer to this question, and to drive the point home, he will draw a contrast between the consequences of the disease for the body and the vice for the soul. In the former case, disease can destroy the body and bring it "to the point where it is no longer a body" (εἰς τὸ μηδὲ σῶμα εἶναι, 609c7). In the latter case, it never so happens that the vices corrupt the soul "and make it waste away until, having brought it to the point of death, they separate it from the body" (609d6–7). The implications of this contrast are then developed in some detail, including the question of how they relate to the central issue of death and justice. This development is quite meandering at 609d9–611a1, but its core consists in repeating that no disease of the body can be translated into the corruption of the soul in the same way as, for example, a poisoned food, whose own badness is *not* a badness proper to the body of the person who eats it, can "implant" to the body a badness that will eventually become its own. This idea, expressed at 609e1–610a2, moderates, so to speak, the initial division of evils. In fact, it implies that some evils can pass from one body to another. The soul, however, stays detached from all such transmissions, and what underlies Socrates' argument is therefore a strong belief in the *causal separation* of what we call "soul" from what we call "body".

Unfortunately, this causal separation does not provide any precise information about what "body" and "soul" are. Regarding the nature of the body, Socrates assumes its divisibility, which seems to correspond to what we know from the *Phaedo*. The soul is not destroyed by any of the bad things that can happen to the body, he says, "not even if the body is cut up into the smallest pieces" (610b2–3). But even here, the focus is not on the general properties of the body, but on what can happen to human bodies. Only from this perspective can Socrates say that the body can be so destroyed that it is no longer a body (609c7). This only makes sense if the object being described is a human body that loses its wholeness and functional unity. The aim of Socrates' argument is, after all, to establish a contrast with the wholeness and unity on the level of the soul, since what needs to be shown is not only that the soul never perishes as a result of its vices but that it

retains its moral identity as independent of the body. Separated from the body that was destroyed by its own badness, the soul will be neither more nor less just or unjust than it was during the time of its being a *human* soul. Whether or not souls can be described as properly incorporeal, or whether they are only fundamentally different from all visible and tangible bodies, the conclusion that, after death, the just will be rewarded for their goodness and the unjust will suffer for their badness remains unchanged. For this purpose, the causal separation summarized above is largely sufficient, regardless of the fact that, throughout his argument, Socrates moves from soul to human being and back again without any methodological scruples.

Up to 610e, then, the contrast between body and soul is limited to emphasizing that divisible bodies are prone to destruction by the badness that follows from their constitution. The soul, on the other hand, only becomes bad by turning vicious – in other words, by doing something in virtue of its own agency. This seems to sum up the difference between vices and diseases, at least insofar as the latter do not result from how bodies act on their own but from how they *suffer* from what belongs to their nature. That much being clear, the second and then the third part of the whole argument leave aside particular bodies and focus more on the soul. The short second part clarifies the soul's role in the grand cosmological context and insists on the necessity of reincarnation (611a4–9), while the more extensive third part finally leads to the much-delayed question about the soul's "truest nature" (611a10–612a6).

The brief reincarnation argument is presented as an obvious corollary to the soul's indestructibility, and it does not deal with reincarnation *as such*. However, its insistence that there are always the same number of souls implies that if life in its mortal forms is not to cease, the souls must return to animate new bodies. This idea is complemented by Socrates' observation that, just as the number of souls cannot diminish, neither can it increase, since this would result in a progressive immortalization and the ultimate depletion of mortal life-forms. Not even the rare defenders of the indestructibility argument are satisfied with this "sort of snowball argument", which offers no new insight into the soul's ontology.²⁵ However, on its most basic level, it implies that souls, of which there are only a certain number, are strong, non-interchangeable individuals. And the same assumption underlies every argument used by Socrates, in different dialogues, to prepare the impending eschatological myth.

25 I borrow the expression "a sort of snowball argument" from Brown 1997, 234–238.

Much more might be expected from the immediate sequel, which returns abruptly and directly to the question of the soul's internal partition. So before I look at how this issue is resolved in *Republic* x, I should therefore remark on the general question of whether the soul's tripartition is really an ontological issue. On a closer look, the only text that could suggest an affirmative answer is the *Timaeus*, granted that even this dialogue offers no more than a likely account of the soul's constitution from different stuffs. As Section 4 will remind us, only the *Timaeus* explicitly assigns to the parts of the soul different origins connected to their location in different parts of the human body. In contrast, the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* use tripartition as a methodological device without claiming that it reflects any underlying ontological truth. In these dialogues, tripartition is a device that enables Socrates to actually *simplify* the complexity of what happens in the soul, in other words, to approximate this complexity without defining exactly what the soul really is. This does not make tripartition "false", since it is a powerful means of unifying the soul's multiple activities and, by the same token, a tool of safeguarding some connection between the soul's many sides and the *one* human person that inhabits the city.²⁶ As a result, some passages on tripartition *may* bear, in one way or another, on the soul's ontology. What I contend is only that Plato does not establish any clear and general connection between these two issues.²⁷

With this caveat in mind, we can follow Socrates' turn to the issue of the soul's true or even "truest" nature (the superlative occurs at 611b1; "true nature" at 612a3–4).²⁸ This turn, however, is entirely methodological and does not lead to definition of what such a true nature is. The soul's simple or incomposite character is evoked as a serious option, but one that could only

26 For a comprehensive discussion of "parts and virtues of state and soul", see Annas 1981, 109–153. Yet another question is whether the parts of the soul amount to something like a person or, to put it more simply, whether they are agent-like (an option criticized in Bobonich 2002 and Stalley 2007). For more on tripartition, agency, and various strategies of personification in *Republic* ix–x, see Chapter 5.4.

27 Lorenz 2006 is a thorough attempt at taking tripartition at its face value. Lorenz points out that "it may, after all, not be essential to the soul to be a composite of reason, spirit, and appetite" (37–38). So, again, the being of the soul and the issue of tripartition may, but need not, be connected. For a similar conclusion reached from a different perspective, see Burnyeat 2006. On parts of the soul in Books iv and x, see also Fronterotta 2013. On the "longer" and "shorter" routes of inquiry into the soul's structure, see Buchheim 2006. Bobonich 2002 is a wide-ranging discussion of tripartition that pays attention to the issue of agency.

28 For a different and complementary take on this argument, see Chapter 5.4, with the focus on its relation to the images of the soul in Books ix and x.

be tested by further investigation. In the first of his four subsequent replicas, two short and two longer ones, Socrates warns us against thinking “that the soul in its truest nature is full of multicolored variety and unlikeness or that it differs with itself” (ὥστε πολλῆς ποικιλίας καὶ ἀνομοιότητός τε καὶ διαφορᾶς γέμειν αὐτὸ πρὸς αὐτό) since “the argument doesn’t allow it” (ὁ γὰρ λόγος οὐκ ἐάσει) (611a10–b3). This could mean that such a picture of the soul would prevent us from giving any coherent account at all, but it could also be an exhortation to speak with the decorum appropriate to this stage of inquiry. Indeed, Socrates’ second replica points to the latter possibility: to be “composed of many parts” (σύνθετόν τε ἐκ πολλῶν) does not make it impossible, but “not easy” (οὐ ῥᾴδιον) to be eternal. To be such only requires being “put together in the finest way” (τῇ καλλίστῃ κεχρημένον συνθέσει) (611b5–7).

In his two longer replicas, Socrates leaves aside this fine-tuning of the composite soul and, instead, proposes that

to see the soul as it is in truth (οἷον δ’ ἐστὶν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), we must not study it as it is while it is maimed by its association with the body and other evils – which is what we were doing earlier – but as it is in its pure state (ἀλλ’ οἷον ἐστὶν καθαρὸν γιγνόμενον), that’s how we should study the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning (λογισμῶ). We’ll then find that it is much finer (πολύ γε κάλλιον) than we thought and that we can see justice and injustice as well as all the other things we’ve discussed far more clearly (ἐναργέστερον). (611b10–c5)

Here the soul’s “pure state” is still not identified with an incomposite nature, and there will be no further inquiry into this issue. The phrase “much finer than we thought” is again ontologically neutral, and, like the affinity argument in the *Phaedo*, it shows that the talk about the soul’s nature is not opposed to the talk about the *degrees* of the soul’s simplicity. This fact confirms that, in *Republic* x, Socrates does *not* ultimately suggest that the soul, in its true nature, must be simple or incomposite.²⁹ The rest of his third replica then sums up the considerations of the tripartite soul and its manifold deformations typical of its attachment to the body (611c6–d8). The fourth and final replica adds the antidote consisting in the practice of philosophy as “akin to the divine and immortal and what always is”, thus

29 See Woolf 2012, 151, 156–157. Robinson 1967 discusses the similarities and differences with the *Phaedo*.

revealing the true nature of the soul, which aims in this direction and is raised “out of the sea in which it now dwells.” However, whether the soul thus revealed “has many parts or just one and whether or in what manner it is put together” remains to be determined (611e1–612a6).³⁰

The simultaneous epistemic and moral purification of the soul is therefore perfectly consistent with neutrality as to the soul’s “true nature”. Socrates insists that the latter cannot be deduced from his account of the soul as immersed in human affairs, and he is consistent in not prejudging the outcome of any future investigation. The focus of the text is firmly on composite or incomposite nature, while the issue of incorporeality is not even mentioned. Looking back at Book IX, we could rephrase the expectation of seeing the soul better after it is purified by philosophy as the hope of finally grasping the soul as that which “is more” (μᾶλλον ὄν) than the body insofar as it is “filled with things that are more” (τὸ τῶν μᾶλλον ὄντων πληρούμενον) (585d7–9). Whether Socrates seriously suggests degrees of being that would correlate with the scale of immutability is not easy to say, not in the least because he describes the soul as “participating” in truth and essence and generally suggests that

that which is related to what is always the same, immortal, and true, is itself of that kind, and comes to be in something of that kind (καὶ αὐτὸ τοιοῦτον ὄν καὶ ἐν τοιούτῳ γιγνόμενον) – this is more, don’t you think (μᾶλλον εἶναί σοι δοκεῖ), than that which is related to what is never the same and mortal, is itself of that kind, and comes to be in something of that kind (585c1–5).³¹

But since αὐτὸ τοιοῦτον ὄν here refers to the soul’s pure pleasure and ἐν τοιούτῳ γιγνόμενον to the soul in which such pleasure occurs, we are still in the same situation as in the *Phaedo*. Once again, the properties that oppose the soul to the body derive from what the soul, if properly educated, aspires to. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, the soul’s clean-cut opposition to

30 Cf. Woolf 2012, 159: “So what we have at 611d–e is not primarily a *description* of the soul’s true nature, but a *prescription* for how we are to discover what that is.”

31 The use of “being more” in *Republic* IX is preceded by μᾶλλον ὄντα in *Republic* VI, 515d3, which describes the objects that the prisoner liberated from the Cave will ultimately grasp. Vlastos 1965, 4 n. 1, says this is “the first occurrence of μᾶλλον with a participle of the verb *to be* in surviving Greek philosophical prose.” Vlastos sees the talk of something “more real” as Plato’s misstep: to talk about various *kinds* rather than degrees of being “would have served him much better as an instrument of categorical inquiry” (19).

the body is mitigated by a difference of degree, regardless of how much the soul is separated from the visible and tangible bodies. It is the latter that the soul is repeatedly opposed to, without any clarification as to whether being visible and tangible is the only criterion for being a body – which is doubtful since, on such a narrow definition, the elements themselves would not be bodies. I will have more to say on this last topic in my interpretation of the *Timaeus* in Section 5. At this point, it is more important to keep in mind that even if we were able to decide whether the soul is composite or incomposite,³² this decision would not automatically resolve the issue of the soul's incorporeality.

To a large extent, as in the *Phaedo*, this ambivalence fuels the myth that brings the *Republic* to an end. The rewards and punishments bestowed on the souls are rendered in vivid terms appropriate to a fully corporeal existence and are enjoyed as such, including the scene in which the souls gather, talk to each other, and compare their various pleasures and sufferings (614d–615a). To allow for such an activity, and also for the subsequent scene where the souls decide on their next incarnation (617d–619e), the soul must keep its nature intact throughout its never-ending life, regardless of the fact that we ignore what exactly that nature is. As we will see in Chapter 5.4, this does not detract from the myth's ethical importance. Ontologically speaking, however, it is a meager result and, perhaps, a confirmation that the soul's agency is a primitive notion that resists further analysis in terms of incorporeality versus corporeality.

4 The *Phaedrus*

If the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* describe the soul as both a thinking and a moving thing, it is in the *Phaedrus* that the importance of motion comes into full focus. At the same time, the dialogue places a new emphasis on the need to understand the nature of the soul. More precisely, in dealing with the art of rhetoric, which is its main subject, the *Phaedrus* firmly asserts that anyone who takes rhetoric seriously

32 The underlying simplicity of the soul throughout the *Republic* is defended by Shields 2001. Bauer 2017 proposes a compromise: the soul is not fundamentally simple, but its nature involves an “unenforced harmony” of its parts. Both authors strive to reconcile *Republic* IV with *Republic* X, but, again, if Socrates acknowledges in the latter that the former may not have exposed the soul's true nature, he still leaves the issue unresolved.

will write with complete accuracy (πάσῃ ἀκριβείᾳ γράψει) about the soul and enable us to see (ποιήσῃ ἰδεῖν) whether it is something which is one and uniform in nature (ἓν καὶ ὁμοιον πέφυκεν) or complex like the form of the body (κατὰ σώματος μορφὴν πολυειδές); for this is what we say is to reveal the nature of something (271a5–7).³³

This instruction is only partially followed in two passages that do say something about the nature of the soul. Also, in the same context of advice to future rhetoricians and teachers of rhetoric, Socrates does not speak clearly when he insists that it is impossible to understand the nature of the soul without understanding “the nature of the whole” – without, however, specifying what the “whole” in question is (270c2): is it that of the composite soul (where the soul’s three distinct parts would form one whole), that of the soul-body compound, or that of the universe?³⁴ Similarly, Socrates’ previous account of “the nature of the soul, both divine and human” (ψυχῆς φύσεως περὶ θείας τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνης, 245c2–3) begins with the expression ψυχὴ πᾶσα (245c5) the ambiguity of which was noted by Hermias and has been debated ever since. Should we understand it as “all soul” or as “every soul”?

Notwithstanding this ambiguity (which will be briefly discussed below), there is a clear methodological correspondence between the two passages. The difference is that pages 270c–271a offer only the most general advice on how to proceed when investigating the nature of any entity under discussion: we need to decide about its simplicity or complexity, and we also need to understand what natural capacity it has to act and to be acted upon (270c8–d7). And if the lines quoted above, 271a5–7, emphasize the first part of this task, the earlier passage, at 245c–246a, corresponds to its second part: its *definitional* focus is precisely on the nature of the soul as revealed through its experiences and actions, whereas the issue of simplicity or complexity is left aside and then *replaced* by the famous tripartite *image* of the soul.

This shift cannot be overemphasized, for it means that tripartition is actually *not* part of the definition of the soul’s nature. It is evoked only when Socrates turns from the soul’s nature and its immortality to the soul’s *idea*, reducing his speech about the latter to what it *resembles*. As a result, we

33 I quote the *Phaedrus* after Yunis 2011; the often modified translation is from Rowe 1986.

34 As pages 270–271 do not lead to a more exact definition of the soul’s nature, I need not enter here the details of the various solutions given to this trilemma. See Thein 2012, and Jelinek and Pappas 2020 for a more detailed overview and discussion.

never learn whether the three parts painted by Socrates belong only to this image or to the soul itself. Nevertheless, both the explanation of the soul's immortality and the subsequent image of the immortal soul contain information that is relevant to the issue of the soul's incorporeality. Without reconstructing the whole argument, we need to look more closely at some points on which Socrates is clear, but also at some problems that remain unresolved.

The first and most important point is, of course, the explicit focus on the motion of the soul, clearly conceived as local motion. In the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, the soul was described as moving in the universe, but it is in the *Phaedrus* that motion, or more precisely self-motion, is identified with the soul's nature and shown to represent the soul's essence (οὐσία) and to convey its definition (λόγος) (245e3–4).³⁵ It is, therefore, the soul's self-motion that determines its immortality. This is clear from Socrates' claims (1) that the nature of the soul is truly grasped (τάληθές νοῆσαι) on the basis of its experiences and its actions (245c3), and (2) that the starting point of the following demonstration (ἀρχὴ δὲ ἀποδείξεως) is the premise "all soul is immortal" (245c5). Strictly speaking, therefore, the demonstration in question is *not* the proof that the soul is immortal. What needs to be demonstrated is the previous claim that erotic madness is something good and divine. At 245b6–c2, Socrates says that this is what "we have to demonstrate" (ἡμῖν δὲ ἀποδεικτέον), even though this demonstration (ἀποδείξις) will be disbelieved by those who are too clever for their own good. The phrase ἀρχὴ δὲ ἀποδείξεως ἥδε, which follows almost immediately, most likely refers to this larger proof, of which the clarification of the nature of the soul is a prerequisite.

Ψυχὴ πάντα ἀθάνατος is thus a crucial premise of the entire palinode that is about to begin. This seems to give a slight advantage to understanding of ψυχὴ πάντα as "all soul" rather than "every soul": each soul is immortal as one whole since, for the palinode to succeed, the irrational element of the soul must be present all along. More importantly for our purposes, what follows is a large canvas containing an explanation of why the soul needs to be immortal rather than a "proof" that it is. And it is here that motion connects to the soul in a way that has nothing metaphorical about it: "for that which is always in motion is immortal," adds Socrates as the second part of his

35 Cf. Sedley 2009, 152 n. 9, who also refers to an important corresponding passage in *Laws* x, 895d1–896a4, on which see the next section.

premise, and then he goes on to ground the eternal motion in self-motion.³⁶ Clearly, Socrates' argument is intended to establish the principle or starting point of motion in the whole universe and to show that only what is not moved by something else can be such an ultimate and independent principle (245c7–d5). Indeed, Socrates adds, such a principle cannot be destroyed if the universe and everything that comes to be are not to be destroyed and come to a final standstill (245d6–e2). At this point, the argument becomes remarkably circular since such an option is ruled out by the fact that “what moves itself has been shown to be immortal” (ἀθανάτου δὲ πεφασμένου τοῦ ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ κινουμένου, 245e3). And, because the soul is by definition that which moves itself, it “will be necessarily something which neither comes into being nor dies” (246a1–2).

My interest is not in whether this demonstration could succeed as a proof of the soul's immortality.³⁷ Rather, I wish to emphasize that the souls are, like in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* x, responsible for the organized motion of the whole universe.³⁸ This, of course, requires the ability of the self-moving souls to move what we call bodies. This ability is specified as follows: “all body which has its source of motion outside itself is soulless (ἄψυχον), whereas that which has it within itself and from itself is ensouled (ἔμψυχον), this being the nature of the soul (ὡς ταύτης οὐσης φύσεως ψυχῆς)” (245e4–6). It is therefore in the nature of the soul not only to move itself but also to animate certain but not all bodies, hence the distinction that we make between living and non-living things. This neat distinction confirms that Socrates' argumentation is indifferent to the composite or incomposite character of the soul. The whole opposition between the souls and the bodies is expressed exclusively in terms of moving and being moved, whether from the “inside” or from the “outside”, where “from the outside” should

36 Here I depart from Rowe 1986, 174, who takes 245c5–246a2 for “the proof of the immortality of the soul”, which Socrates “methodically begins with,” and from Yunis 2011, 136–137, who takes ψυχὴ πάντα ἀθάνατος for “the conclusion of the argument, placed first for emphasis, clarity, and grandeur”, and sees τὸ γὰρ ἀεικίνητον ἀθάνατον as the “axiomatic” premise of the entire argument. I read both phrases as introducing a larger demonstration whose proper object is the goodness of erotic madness. This difference has no bearing on the nature of the soul. I agree with both Rowe and Yunis that, at 245c5, ἀεικίνητον is superior to αὐτοκίνητον. See also Declava Caizzi 1970.

37 For discussion of this and related issues, see, e.g., Demos 1968, Bett 1986, Hankinson 1990, Price 1990, Moore 2014.

38 More exactly, in these dialogues, the repeatedly incarnated souls are in charge of all organized motion in that part of the world where generation and corruption occur. Only the *Timaeus* and *Laws* x will also pay attention to the soul's role in celestial motion.

mean through the ensouled bodies, like when I hold and move a pen or a cup of coffee.

Compared to the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, this is indeed a new line of argument since, in those dialogues, the power of the soul to move a body was assumed but never so directly addressed. However, apart from emphasizing the soul's motion, Socrates adds nothing about *how exactly* the soul transfers its motion to the tridimensional mass that is a living body. The soul is not an unmoved mover, and nothing suggests efficient causation similar to that which the soul will acquire as an Aristotelian form. Therefore, if there is some relevant clue to be found in Socrates' palinode, we must look for it, with all due caution, in the subsequent image of the soul. I will focus on the image as such, together with the first part of the description of the soul's behavior in the universe (246a3–e3). In contrast, I will ignore the controversial issues raised by the next part of the description, such as the unspecified relation between the motion of the souls and the motion of the heavens. As far as the latter is concerned, we should only bear in mind that the *Phaedrus* does not introduce, let alone assign to the soul, the geometrically determined rotational motion that the *Timaeus* will associate with the nature of the intellect.³⁹

The image that is the *idea* of the soul is introduced as a substitute for a complete explanation. This substitution begins with a direct visualization of the invisible soul: "Let it then resemble the naturally combined winged power of a team of horses and their charioteer" (ἐοικέτω δὴ συμφύτῳ δυνάμει ὑποπτέρου ζεύγους τε καὶ ἡνιόχου, 246a5–6). I follow Yunis' text⁴⁰ while modifying Rowe's translation to emphasize that "winged" characterizes not only the horses, but also the charioteer. The whole soul is winged and Socrates develops his image accordingly, including "the quills of the feathers" which "swell and set to growing from their roots under the *whole form* of the soul" (ὑπὸ πᾶν τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς εἶδος) (251b5–7). Indeed, the soul is properly imagined as a tripartite wing that grows feathers and reaches maturity when its plumage is at its fullest and most perfect. This becomes clear immediately after Socrates describes the two horses and the charioteer as three parts explaining moral psychology. The feathered wing, on the other hand, allows

39 Here, and in the next section, I will not discuss the attempts at importing the Timaeian account of the world soul into the *Phaedrus*. This line of interpretation, inspired by some passages in Plotinus' *On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies* (*Enneads* IV, 8 [6]), aims at goals different from my main topic.

40 At 246a5 (= 246a6 Burnet), Yunis, like most recent editors starting with Ast, reads ἐοικέτω. The alternative reading is Hermias' εἰοικέ τῳ δὴ ("it looks like").

Socrates to say more about the soul as a whole in the context of his explanation of the difference between the mortal and the immortal living beings:

All soul has the care of all that is soulless (ψυχὴ πᾶσα παντὸς ἐπιμελεῖται τοῦ ἀψύχου), and patrols the whole universe, coming to be now in one form, now in another (ἄλλοτ' ἐν ἄλλοις εἶδεσι γιγνομένη). Now when it is perfect and in full plumage (ἐπτερωμένη), it travels through the air and governs the whole cosmos; but the one that has shed its feathers (ἢ πετερορρησασα)⁴¹ is swept along until it lays hold of something solid (στερεοῦ τινος), where it settles down, taking on an earthy body (σῶμα γήϊνον), which seems to move itself because of the power of soul, and the whole is called a living being, soul and body fixed together, and acquires the name “mortal” (246b6–c6).

Socrates goes on to say that we have never seen or conceived of god adequately, so we visualize (πλάττομεν) the latter as a living being with a soul and a body combined for all time (246c6–d2). Gods are thus modeled as souls with permanent bodies, with the individual Olympian divinities serving as paradigms for what human souls resemble and seek in their earthly life (252c3–253c6). This is why the gods are used extensively in Socrates' description of human lives, but their evocation does not shed any new light on what the soul is. What Socrates has to add on this subject is therefore integrated into his account of the wing, which completes the initial picture of the tripartite soul. At 246d5–e3, this account offers a succinct and more colorful summary of what we know from the *Phaedo*: “wing” stands for “soul” insofar as the latter can embrace the divine and lift itself towards the beautiful, the wisdom, and the good (the Forms will be introduced shortly). The latter nourish the wing's plumage, while their opposites cause its decay. As in the affinity argument of the *Phaedo*, the soul is thus situated on a scale that extends from the body as tangible and “earthy” to the properly nourished soul that aims to grasp the incorporeal Forms (“without color or shape, intangible”) situated outside the universe (247c4–d1).

41 In Rowe's translation, the soul “has lost its wings.” Nehamas and Woodruff's translation, in Cooper 1997, also speaks about “a soul that sheds its wings.” But the process implied is one of molting, i.e. losing the feathers, not losing the *wings*; cf. again the image of the growing feathers at 251b5–7. For this sense of the verb πετερορρυέω, see Aristotle on the peafowl: “The bird molts when the earliest trees are shedding their leaves, and recovers its plumage when the same trees are recovering their foliage” (*HA* VI, 9, 564a32–b2).

Most readers have found the exact wording of what Socrates says about the wing and the soul so strange that they have emended the text contained in all the manuscripts. Without emendation, Socrates states that

the natural property of the wing (πέφυκεν ἡ πτεροῦ δύναμις) is to lift what is heavy upwards, carrying it through the air to where the race of the gods resides, the soul having, of the things associated with the body, the greatest share in the divine" (κεκοινώνηκε δέ πη μάλιστα τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ θεοῦ ψυχῇ). (246d5–e1)

The emendation, first introduced by Heindorf, brackets the noun ψυχῇ and, in the second step, connects κεκοινώνηκε with "wing", not "soul". All editors agree on the necessity of this solution. For Heindorf himself, "soul" is a gloss that is "absurd or rather meaningless". In his commentary, de Vries echoes this judgment and follows Heindorf in referring to Plutarch, whom he takes (mistakenly) to disregard "soul" too. According to Rowe, it "must a gloss, since soul is emphatically not one of the things which 'belong to the sphere of the body'." Less directly, and not incorrectly, Yunis remarks in support of this reading that "although the wings are part of the soul, they can be considered in relation to the body since mortal being are conglomeration of soul and body (246c2–6)."⁴²

All these authors think that to leave the sentence without emendation would imply that the soul is corporeal. But the expression τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα need not imply that the soul is truly one of the bodies, which would be strange even for its "wings". Rather, this expression seems to refer to the soul's interaction with the corporeal realm. After all, regardless of its precise ontology, it is true that the soul is associated with bodies, not least as their self-moving mover. In the quoted sentence, then, Plato is only maintaining the usual degree of uncertainty about the soul's proper nature. So we could agree with Yunis' comment and still follow the manuscripts: "in relation to

42 Heindorf 1802, 250; de Vries 1969, 130; Rowe 1986, 178; Yunis 2011, 139. Concerning the alleged support for the emendation in Plutarch, *Platonic Questions* 1004C, Heindorf and de Vries quote only the *question* Plutarch is about to deal with but not his *answer*. While reading the sentence in question, Plutarch advises us to "understand quite simply that, while there are good many faculties of the soul concerned with the body (τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεων πλείονων οὐσῶν), the faculty of reason or thought, whose objects he has said are things divine and celestial, is most closely akin to the divine" (1004D in Cherniss 1976). Plutarch's view is therefore close to what I suggest in the next paragraph. Also, in the *Timaeus*, the world soul is partly made up of οὐσία that is περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένη (35a2–3). See the next section.

the body” can apply to the soul, of which Socrates offers an image where “wing” stands for the soul’s nature and its power. Again, it is important to realize that, as in the *Phaedo*, Socrates projects our soul on an evaluative scale that ranges from a wing-like and godlike imaginary body to the “earthly body”, where the soul lands once it falls from the divine. And even at the most valuable, divine end of this scale, at its most distant from the tangible body, the soul is not transformed into what is fully incorporeal, intangible, and without figure.

To sum up: the tangible body or something solid (στερεόν, 246c3; cf. 239c5, 255c4) and the figureless Forms give us the coordinates of the soul’s motion, but neither belongs to the proper nature of the soul, which is characterized by the soul’s natural self-motion, and also by its task to care about bodies, which precludes a permanent disengagement from the corporeal realm (see again 245e4–6: to make the body ἔμψυχον belongs to the φύσις of the soul). The self-motion is more pronounced here than in the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*, but this seems to be mainly due to the different issues discussed in these dialogues. Regardless of how we understand the soul’s tripartition – does it belong to the soul’s images or to its being? –, all three dialogues ascribe to the soul the capacity for local motion, which is a prerequisite for its immortality. As an agent and the subject of experience, the soul has to live somewhere, and Socrates often connects the soul’s location to its achievements or its failures. Repeatedly, however, the image of the soul moving around the physical universe obscures the question of what the soul is and how it is constituted. By the same token, we have learned nothing so far about how the soul’s motion relates to its ability to think. Indeed, nothing in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, or *Phaedrus* contradicts the conclusion that this relationship is contingent and that animation and thought are two fundamental features that soul simply happens to have.

Before taking a brief look at how this situation changes in the *Timaeus*, it must be emphasized that, no less than the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* draws our attention to the existence of two different kinds of dualism in Plato: one that divides bodies from the Forms and another that separates bodies from souls. And whereas the former is defined by the incorporeality of Forms whose causal roles are strikingly diverse,⁴³ the human soul’s task is to *fully* animate the body and, in the best of cases, to be a successful intellectual

43 Some Forms, such as Largeness or Equality, are posited as having direct impact on things; other Forms, such as Justice or Piety, are instantiated in virtue of being grasped by our intellect; still other Forms are imitated by an agent such as the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. These differences need not be discussed here.

and moral agent.⁴⁴ The motion is required for the first of these two tasks, whereas the ability to think is a prerequisite for the second. These tasks are woven together in the narrative that Socrates offers about individual souls and their actions and experiences. In the *Phaedo*, *Republic* x, and the *Phaedrus*, the degree of understanding or knowledge has a direct impact on the kind of life the soul is living both here and in the afterlife. *This* degree, however, cannot change the soul's degree of being a soul; as we know from the previous chapter, no soul can ever be more or less a soul than another (*Phaedo* 93b3–6). Yet it is about this being a soul that we have learned little beyond the necessary fact that our soul moves and that it thinks, and that the former activity pulls the soul towards visible and tangible bodies, whereas the second turns its attention towards invisible and intangible objects of thought. It can be expected that this situation will somehow change in the *Timaeus*, where we hear about what the soul is *made of* but also about how thought and a certain kind of motion are so tightly related that the former can be described as the latter.

5 The *Timaeus*

In the *Timaeus*, Plato deals with the soul outside of the human ethical concerns that permeate the dialogues I have discussed so far. The focus is on cosmic goodness, and individual ethics is only touched upon in connection with the restoration of the original structure of the intellect by means of a thoroughly internalized mathematical astronomy (see 47a7–c4, 90b1–d7). This narrowing does not imply a major shift in Plato's understanding of the soul; it simply follows from the scope and aim of Timaeus' speech, where it is compensated by a new genetic account of the soul. Regarding this speech, I will focus on what the world soul and our intellect are made of. Although my interest is still in the reincarnating souls, Timaeus points towards both the structural and the material kinship of the world soul and the intellect as an immortal part of individual souls. And since he is much more forthcoming about the world soul, we cannot neglect it entirely, but must look at how one and the same account explains (1) how and from what stuff (to use a neutral term) the demiurge assembles the world soul and (2) how he sets

44 Müller 2017 offers a succinct presentation of Plato's two dualisms, which he labels "metaphysical dualism" and "anthropological dualism". Jorgenson 2018, 201, notes a similar difference and emphasizes that the soul's philosophical task consists in bridging the gap between itself and the Forms.

it in motion. In this account, the issues of constitution, motion, and thinking are tightly interwoven, and they all rely on an explicit spatial arrangement of the soul.

To speak about “stuff” is meant to convey the fact that the world soul is made out of something entirely different from the elements that give the bodies their visibility (like fire does) and tangibility (like earth does).⁴⁵ These elements are only used to create the corporeal aspect of the world, which is described as *sōmatoeides* (31b4). Once completed, the cosmic body is a solid composed of the totality of the four elements (31b–32c) with their distinct geometrical structures.⁴⁶ It is, says Timaeus, “a whole and complete body made up of complete bodies” (ὅλον καὶ τέλειον ἐκ τετέλων σωμάτων σῶμα, 34b2). The constitution of this complete body follows after the constitution of the world soul from its three original ingredients: Being, the Same, the Different. Their givenness is underlined by Timaeus’ use of a demonstrative pronoun: they are simply “these here” (τῶνδὲ, 35a1). In a sense, however, there are *six* original ingredients, since each of the three occurs in both indivisible and divisible forms. The demiurge can thus use “the Being that is indivisible and always changeless (τῆς ἀμερίστου καὶ ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ἐχούσης οὐσίας), and the one that is divisible and comes to be in relation to bodies (καὶ τῆς αὖ περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς)” (35a1–3).⁴⁷ The same two-foldness applies to the Same and the Different, and in all three cases, the demiurge creates a mixture of the indivisible and the divisible versions. In the case of Being, for example, “he made a mixed form of being (συννεκράσας οὐσίας εἶδος) in the middle, derived from the other two” (35a3–4). The result is nine ingredients, six of which retain, presumably to varying degrees, some relation to bodies (I assume that the phrase περὶ τὰ σώματα, used at 35a2, is relevant to all mixtures containing some portion of what is

45 The remarks that follow cannot offer a detailed analysis of a very complex issue. For such an analysis that also includes a comparison between the *Timaeus* and the *Sophist*, see Betegh 2021.

46 On the elements and their variety, see Bodnár 2008. This issue is beyond the scope of my present inquiry.

47 This corresponds to how *Phaedo* 78c6–8 distinguishes between the incomposite and unchangeable things and the things that are composite and changing. Given how this distinction is developed in the *Phaedo* (see Section 1 above), Timaeus would be forced to acknowledge that the world soul is only almost incorporeal. I assume that there is no fundamental difference between ἀσύνθετον employed in the *Phaedo* and ἀμερίστον used in the *Timaeus*; the latter would then be closer to *Republic* x and its above-quoted claim that even what is “composed (σύνθετόν) of many parts” can be eternal if it is “put together in the finest way” (61b5–7).

divisible). But, of course, at this stage of creation (or, more neutrally, at this level of composition), there are still no bodies in the sense of either the four geometrically determined elements or their perceptible masses. So in what sense are two-thirds of the soul stuff related to bodies?

The usual answer to this question assumes that Timaeus is simply anticipating the world soul's relation to the as yet uncomposed physical universe. Regardless of its divisibility and spatial arrangement, the world soul is fully incorporeal. Luc Brisson, for example, warns us that, first and foremost, "we must not take metaphors for reality" and, perpetuating the error of Speusippus or Aristotle, give the world soul an extension (μέγεθος).⁴⁸ Even so, the world soul can be described as incorporeal and yet moving by constant circular motion.⁴⁹ The latter then makes the soul reach towards the material realm, more specifically towards the motions of celestial bodies. The overall result can be summarized as follows:

Take first the revolutions of the world-soul. These have the most intimate possible link with the visibly circular motions of the heavens. They are not merely the cause of those motions. The celestial motions *are* the revolutions of the world-soul, made visible. At 47b Timaeus maintains that we have been given eyes "in order that, *seeing the revolutions of intellect in the heavens*, we may use them upon the revolutions of thought inside ourselves, which are akin to them". And as he has already explained at 38–9, those revolutions became visible when the Creator illuminated each of them by planting in it its own heavenly body. In themselves the world-soul and its revolutions are incorporeal (36a6), but when illumination is added, the combined effect is something bodily. The incorporeal thus differs from the corporeal, not by necessarily being altogether non-spatial, but by lacking essential characteristics of body, such as visibility and tangibility (cf. 28b, 31b). There is no reason why an incorporeal should not have a circular motion, even though its invisibility and intangibility make this undetectable to the senses.⁵⁰

48 Brisson 1974, 339.

49 See Broadie 2012, 94: "the cosmic body and the cosmic soul fit together as two exactly interpenetrating spheres, one corporeal, the other incorporeal; and each is in circular motion (the body: 34a1–5; the soul: 36c2–d7 and 37a5)." At 36d9–e1, the demiurge places "all that is σωματοειδές" within the world soul.

50 Sedley 1999, 317–318. I admit to not understanding the reference to 36a6 (perhaps should it be 35a5–6 with reference to ἀμερής as opposed to what is divisible and κατὰ

There is certainly no reason to disagree with the *sense* of this summary, but the *meaning* of the words “incorporeal” and “bodily” remains elusive. In this respect, the quoted summary faithfully reproduces the problem: Timaeus makes ample use of the polarity that opposes the soul to the visible and tangible body, but offers no statement to the effect that the soul is sufficiently defined by invisibility and intangibility (it cannot be since the Forms and mathematical objects are also such), or that body is sufficiently defined by visibility and tangibility (it cannot be since the elements are bodies that are neither visible nor tangible as such). What is clear is that the soul can be described as consisting of some stuff, and that this stuff is capable of two things. First, it receives the well-defined ratios that are imposed on it (it is also capable of thinking these ratios). Second, it has the capacity to animate the organized elemental and perceptible matter. How the soul does it is no clearer than it was in the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus* although, in the *Timaeus*, the description of one portion of the soul stuff as *περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένη* seems to bring the suggested image of the soul even closer to the corporeal realm: used at 35a2–3 about part of the world soul, the same expression will reappear at 84b4 where Timaeus speaks about diseases (*παθήματα*) that are *περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνόμενα*, in other words that take place in bodies and affect them. Of course, even diseases *as such* are not bodies (the same holds for the soul’s revolutions), but they are certainly states of bodies and do not occur in separation from the latter.

In short, by introducing both the divisible and the indivisible stuff blended together into a rotating tridimensional structure, the description of the world soul suggests an ontology *sui generis*, which implies its own kind of dualism, where what is different from the elemental bodies and their masses can only be labelled “incorporeal” with some further qualification.⁵¹ The same thing is then true of the human intellect, since it is a structural replica of the world soul, from which it differs by the *quality of the stuff* it is composed of. The strangeness of this difference is rarely emphasized,⁵² but

τὰ σώματα). Sedley’s interpretation, which I do *not* consider wrong, is followed by, e.g., Burnyeat 2000, 58–59, or Sorabji 2003, 154.

51 On the world soul and its specific relation to mind-body dualism, see Fronterotta 2015, 43 n. 11. Carone 2005a suggests that, in this context, we reject the vocabulary of dualism entirely. I leave aside the soul’s mortal parts, of which Timaeus only describes their location in the body and their function. Karfik 2005, 214, concludes that they are “specific movements of specific tissues, both arising from the immortal soul and acting upon it. There is no mortal soul apart from the body of a living being nor is there any substrate of it other than the bodily tissues of an organism.”

52 Broadie 2012, 92–93, is an honorable exception.

Timaeus leaves no doubt about it: to produce human intellects, the demiurge

turned again to the mixing bowl he had used before, the one in which he had blended and mixed the soul of the universe. He began to pour into it what remained of the previous ingredients and to mix them in somewhat the same way (τρόπον μὲν τινα τὸν αὐτόν), though these were no longer invariably and constantly pure, but of a second and third grade of purity (ἀλλὰ δεύτερα καὶ τρίτα) (41d4–7).

Is this statement part of the dialogue's moral message, or is it relevant to the ontology of the soul? The affirmative answer to the first question is obvious, even to those who dismiss the passage as vague and metaphorical.⁵³ But if the moral message assumes that the world soul's cognition is superior to human mind, then we expect the latter's shortcomings to be due to our limited view of the world, not to the inferior quality of our soul stuff. The suggested gradation of the soul-blend's purity (the text mentions three degrees) can hardly shed any clear light on the nature of the soul. Rather, it adds weight to the previous description of the world soul's life as a perfect unity of rotating, touching various objects, and giving this touch an articulate structure of true beliefs and convictions about things that come to be, and understanding and knowledge about things that are (37a2–c5).⁵⁴ By the same token, however, this very description makes us realize that Timaeus is saying something valuable and precise about the structure of thought, but he only partially clarifies the nature of the soul that does the thinking.

This is not a negative result. Rather, this is how the cosmological context reveals the limits of the language we use to speak of the soul. In the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* or the *Phaedrus*, the soul visits the confines of the universe, but this motion starts from its individual agency and capacity for experience. In the *Timaeus*, the presentation goes from the world soul to individual human intellects, the latter being modeled after the former: the world soul thus

53 See, e.g., Cornford 1935, 143: "in all this section of the dialogue the veil of myth grows thicker again, and it is useless to discuss problems that would arise only if the statements were meant literally." *Philebus* 30b–e echoes *Timaeus* 41d4–7 when Socrates' remarks on the relation between the intellect as the king that orders the universe and the less powerful intellect in our soul. These remarks develop no independent ontology of the soul.

54 For a detailed account of the cognition of the world soul, see Corcilius 2018; cf. also several passages in Betegh 2019 and Betegh 2021.

explains all epistemic capacity, but cannot ground the non-epistemic actions and states of the human soul. This, in turn, is why there is so little to say about the Timaeon soul if we see its mixed composition as only an incorporeal, mathematically expressed structure. However, if we take seriously the idea of the soul as a partially divisible mixture extending through the material universe, we are justified in our suspicion that the Platonic soul is mostly incorporeal in the sense of being invisible and intangible *for our senses* while moving and thinking in complex patterns that are made possible by the divisibility of the stuff it is made of. No doubt, any such suggestion is, strictly speaking, unverifiable. But, even if Timaeus' speech is no more than a likely story, it is worth noticing that, like other dialogues we have discussed so far, it does not connect the immortality of the soul with incorporeality. In this respect, the soul, incorporeal or not, is on a par with other components of the universe that are immortal or everlasting: they can only be so thanks to the perfect art and the good will of the demiurge (see 41a7–8).

All this seems to make the nature of the soul quite undecidable, at least insofar as we assume that there *is* a nature of the soul that should be definable beyond the explanation of its activity. In this respect, Timaeus' speech is very cautious; in fact, his explanation of what the world soul and the human intellect are is equally compatible with different interpretations of their composition. That Timaeus leaves aside the description of the soul's individual agency in the sense discussed in other dialogues does not result in a purified image of a simple and fully incorporeal soul. On the contrary, the resulting image is one of striking complexity, which is projected into the intellectual core of the soul. While the world soul is able to think the composite being, it is coextensive with the physical universe, and human intellect is embedded in the latter in its own way. This clarifies the soul's operations in the universe, but we learn little about what the soul is beyond the sum of these operations and their objects. In this respect, the cosmic perspective on the soul yields no more resolution than focusing on the individual soul with its actions and experiences.

6 *Laws x and the Sophist*

This tentative and admittedly incomplete conclusion finds further support in *Laws x*, where the Athenian Visitor offers a long disquisition on the soul, beginning with self-motion as the motion "that moves both itself and other things, suitable for all active and passive processes, and accurately termed

the source of change and motion in all things that exist" (894c4–7).⁵⁵ As in the *Phaedrus*, self-motion defines the soul (895e10–896a4), which is given two further characteristics: as in the *Phaedo*, it naturally rules over the body; as in the *Timaeus*, it is older and nobler than the body (896b10–c7). This eclectic progress allows the Athenian to conclude that "habits, customs, will, calculation, right opinion, diligence and memory will come prior to length, breadth, depth and strength of the bodies (μήκους σωμάτων καὶ πλάτους καὶ βάθους καὶ ῥώμης), if soul is prior to body" (896c9–d3). This agrees with the premise of the soul's active omnipresence: it resides everywhere and causes all motion, in other words, "all things", regardless of whether they are good or evil (896d5–e2).

This interweaving of ethics and physics is unparalleled in other dialogues, and its tenor suits the task of providing the political rulers with a well-argued weapon against atheism. Accordingly, in order to distance the divine soul from corporeal nature, the Athenian is emphatic about the soul as an agency that moves and shuffles bodies, such as stars. Clearly, his account is not intended as a metaphor for the self-sustaining order of the universe. And yet, even in this context, Plato does not venture beyond the initial identification of the soul with self-motion. Unlike the *Phaedrus*, the Athenian simply avoids asking, "self-motion of what?" (the *Phaedrus* may not truly answer this question, but it emphasizes its difficulty and offers an image that replaces the real answer).⁵⁶ It is clear that the soul's actions precede the three dimensions of the bodies, but the soul as such receives no further description and is repeatedly presented as a diverse ensemble of functions that share, at least, their irreducibility to the states of visible and tangible bodies. In this respect, the richness of Book x follows from a theoretically precarious compromise where the soul operating at the cosmic level takes charge of motions connected with the emotional, if not outright irrational, part of the human soul: the soul's "primary" motions that achieve a shared goal by using the "secondary" motions of the bodies are "wish,

55 The stronger thematic continuity with the previous two sections (and especially the *Phaedrus*) is why I begin this section with the *Laws* and only then turn to the *Sophist*. Both dialogues share the issue of soul, life, and motion, which is why I treat them in one section.

56 Concerning the soul's λόγος, the difference between the two texts is small, but perhaps telling. *Laws* x define soul directly as "the motion itself capable of moving itself" (τὴν δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν): the soul is motion, not only in motion (896a1–4). The *Phaedrus* speaks about "what moves itself" (τὸ αὐτὸ κινουόν): the soul is a self-mover, something that moves itself, rather than self-motion *per se* (245c8). Both texts of course agree that soul is ἀρχὴ κινήσεως.

reflection, care, deliberation, true and false belief, joy, pain, confidence, fear, hate, love and all the kindred motions" (897a1–3). There is no doubt that these primary motions express themselves across a very broad spectrum of mental as well as physiological states.

The focus is, therefore, not on the soul's ontology, but on both epistemic and emotional mental states and on their place in a providential teleology that uses what appears to be bad to enhance the overall goodness of the soul-governed world. The composition and structure of the soul are, therefore, not the main issue, and the range of the soul's tasks reminds us of various dialogues in which the soul plays the leading role. The creation of images that confirm the similarity between "the course and motion of the heavens" and "the motion and revolution and reasoning of intellect" (897c4–6) has a certain rhetorical flavor since its intended audience is all the citizens of the planned city. We are not "incompetent makers of verbal images", says the Athenian at 898b3, after inviting us to grasp "the nature of the motion of intellect" (897d3) by visualizing the wheels or a sphere turning on a lathe: "this bears the closest possible affinity and likeness to the cyclical motion of intellect" (898a5–6). On the basis of such an image, we understand intuitively that the soul is what "drives round the sun, moon and the other celestial bodies" (898d3–4). More specifically, we can be "fairly confident" that the soul driving the sun "operates in one of three ways":

Either (a) the soul resides within (ἐντός) this visible spherical body and carries it wherever it goes, just as our soul (ἡ παρ' ἡμῖν ψυχή) takes us around from one place to another, or (b) it acquires its own body (σῶμα αὐτῇ) of fire or air of some kind (as certain people maintain), and impels the sun by the contact of body with body (ὥθει βίᾳ σώματι σῶμα), or (c) it is itself entirely bodiless (αὐτὴ ψιλὴ σώματος οὐσα), but guides the sun along its path by virtue of possessing some other prodigious and wonderful powers. (x, 898e8–899a4)

Here Plato finally mentions the soul, which is ψιλὴ σώματος or, literally, "stripped off the body". However, this expression is not discussed further and it takes its meaning from the context, where it appears as one of the three options in which the soul relates to the celestial body it moves. These options are not limited to the experience of the human soul (cf. 895c11–12), which is connected only with the first option. This first option is interesting in being ontologically neutral: as phrased by the Athenian, it does not answer the question "is the soul incorporeal?" but only the explicit question

“what is the position of the soul in relation to what is moved by it?” In fact, the second option is also ontologically neutral: it is symmetrical to the first option in clearly implying that the soul would not be within but without the body it moves. At the same time, given that the second option makes the soul itself into a kind of body that moves another body, it is possible to think that *both* the first *and* third options would naturally imply an incorporeal soul. The difference is that, in the first option, the soul moves the celestial body analogously to *our* soul moving *our* body, whereas the third option, which cannot be modeled on our experience, would imply some magical power to move bodies, without touching them, from without. Clearly, therefore, even if we take the soul to be entirely incorporeal, the third option is less attractive than the first.⁵⁷

The quoted passage with its three options is a good reminder that this is as close as Plato ever comes to a fully stated incorporeality of the soul. Yet the lack of decision among the options should *not* be read as implying that the soul could, after all, be corporeal even if distinct from the visible and tangible bodies. The Athenian presents these options as different ways of persuading the potential believers of the divine status of the soul that moves celestial bodies (see 899b3–9). As a result, he is hesitant to discuss the details of the soul’s immortality and the issue of incorporeality, as they may be too refined for the general public.

No such discretion is required in the *Sophist*, but even in this dialogue, the Eleatic Visitor introduces the soul’s incorporeality as an option that the reformed materialists will not fully espouse, even when they concede that some entities present in the soul, such as justice or wisdom, are indeed incorporeal. The passage in question, the famous “gigantomachy” about being (246a4–5), is revelatory of Plato’s reticence about the proper ontology of the soul. According to the Visitor, the battle is between two camps: the materialists who “insist that what is is constituted exclusively by what offers resistance to touch in some way, defining body and being as the same thing” (246a10–b2), and the army of those who “enforce their view that true being consists of some sort of intelligible and bodiless forms (νοητὰ καὶ ἀσώματα εἶδη)” (246b7–8).⁵⁸ Claiming that the materialists are more intractable in

57 For another comment on this passage and its open-ended character, see Carone 2005a, 256 n. 99.

58 The translation of the *Sophist* is Rowe 2015, occasionally modified. For general discussions of the battle, see Brown 1998, Politis 2006, and Wiitala 2018, all of whom analyze the meaning of the expression “what completely is” (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν) that I briefly discuss below.

their views, the Visitor shows them the error of their ways by constructing an argument that has more to do with ethics than with the question of being in some more technical sense (see 246d4–9 on making the materialists “better people”). For the sake of the Visitor’s argument, the materialists will easily succumb to shame and concede that there are beings other than bodies.

This concession implies the soul, and the distinction between the soul and the body of a mortal creature (246e5–9), but it is not the soul as such that is said to be incorporeal. According to the reformed materialists, the soul is “something from among the things that are” (τι τῶν ὄντων, 246e9) *and* the individual souls differ among themselves by properties such as being just or unjust, wise or unwise (247a2–3). Explicitly incorporeal will then be what causes these properties to occur in the souls, namely justice and wisdom, and also their opposites: it is “in virtue of their possession or presence” (ἔξει καὶ παρουσίᾳ, 247a5–6) that the souls become just or unjust, wise or unwise. As for justice and wisdom, together with other virtues and their opposites, they cannot be seen or touched, and, generally, even the reformed materialists are not “saying that anything like that has some sort of body” (μὴν σῶμά τι λέγουσιν ἵσχειν, 247b6).

The scheme of the soul’s participation in virtues as incorporeal Forms is consistent with a number of other dialogues, and if we leave aside the rhetoric of shaming, the portrait of the reformed materialists’ change of mind is not far removed from Socrates’ philosophical conversion described in the *Phaedo*. Nevertheless, Theaetetus uses the moralizing rather than the epistemic idiom to sum up how far, on his understanding, the reformed materialists are prepared to go with what, from among the invisible things, is or could be incorporeal:

About all this they do not answer in only one way; they say the soul itself (ψυχὴν αὐτήν) seems to them to possess body of a sort (σῶμά τι), whereas when it comes to wisdom and each of the other things you have asked them about, they’re too ashamed to dare either to concede that such things don’t figure at all among the things that are or to insist that they are all bodies (πάντ’ εἶναι σῶματα). (247b7–c2)

In this way, the reformed materialists seem to take up the second option from *Laws* x, 898e8–899a4: the soul is composed of some kind of corporeal stuff that is neither visible nor tangible to us. However, the context is different: from the question of how souls move celestial bodies, we have moved to the soul as the bearer of the opposite moral properties such as justice

and injustice. What motivates the reformed materialist's reticence may, therefore, be a concern that an incorporeal bearer of the incorporeal opposites is an overly abstract notion divorced from the virtues and vices of human soul. The validity of this interpretation is difficult to assess, however, since the discussion turns immediately away from the soul and towards a general criterion of being that would apply to both incorporeal and corporeal entities.

At 247c9–e6, this discussion offers no specific information about the soul, except that it must be “something” if it has the capacity (δύναμις) to act or be acted upon (for example, to receive justice or wisdom). Nor is anything new ventured on the nature of the soul in the following discussion of the views of “the Friends of the Forms” (248a4–5). This discussion, distinguishing between becoming and being, informs us that it is “through thinking by the soul” (διὰ λογισμοῦ ψυχῆ) that we reach what truly is (248a10–13). Thus, “the soul knows and the being is what is known” (248d1–2). This is a valuable piece of epistemology, suggesting the Friends of the Forms *might* take the soul to be incorporeal, but the inference is for us to make. In any case, it is not confirmed by the Visitor's suggestion that if, on this account, knowing is doing something to the object of knowledge, then the status of the knowable being is not entirely clear: both the known being and the knowing soul undergo some sort of change. As a result, the following debate is not primarily about the soul but mentions the soul along with general ontological issues.

Passing from being as the *object* of thought to including what thinks to the range of “what completely is” (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν), this debate stems from the assertion that it would be absurd to believe that, in the scope of full reality, there is nothing that lives, thinks, and moves (248e7–249a2). But this claim implies first and foremost that the soul's reality is tied to life and motion. Reading carefully through the next and much more convoluted replicas may lead us to conclude that the soul *is* no less fully than the incorporeal beings, but they need not have *the same kind* of being. Frustratingly, the Visitor does not clarify in what sense “what completely is” lives, thinks, and moves: should we understand these activities as the features that *all* reality exhibits in various ways, or are they exercised by some, but not necessarily all, the real beings?⁵⁹ While he clearly says that life and intellect imply the presence of the soul (249a4–7), the Visitor is less clear about whether this

59 On the inclusion of soul as active being in “what completely is”, see Politis 2006, 167–168. See also Brown 1998, 201–202.

presence, as a condition of the intelligibility of beings, is to be attributed to these beings themselves as objects of thought. At 249a5–10, the dilemma is stated concerning the unknowability of unchanging being and the unknowability of being that changes, but this dilemma is then discussed without any concern for the role of the soul. After 249a9–10, where the dilemma is formulated, the discussion contains no explicit mention of the soul, and *noûs* only appears in the sense of human understanding, as at 249c3. However, this may be due to the Visitor's implicit willingness to attribute the change to that which thinks, the soul, rather than to the objects of thought in the sense of the Forms.⁶⁰

For all its philosophical density, the much-analyzed issue of “the great forms” (or “kinds”) only concerns a slice of the ontological variety suggested by the introduction of τὸ παντελὺς ὅν at 248e7–249a2. The soul will receive no independent analysis, and the minimal conclusion seems to be that the soul counts among true beings and that it has the capacity to act and be acted upon. Of course, this is hardly enough to clarify what the soul properly is, since the Visitor never limits this capacity to the incorporeal entities alone. Our assumption that the reformed materialists must be wrong and that the soul, like the Forms, should be understood as fully incorporeal, is thus not supported by any argument. Instead, this assumption usually follows from our belief that the soul is shown to be incorporeal in other dialogues where Plato deals with its nature in more detail. What I wanted to point out – and will now summarize in a few concluding remarks – is that the dialogues in question do not provide such a demonstration. This cannot and must not serve as an argument *against* the soul's incorporeality. Nevertheless, we face the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: what motivates Plato's reticence concerning this whole issue?

7 Concluding Remarks

Each section of this chapter highlighted, in its own and slightly different way, the striking variety of tasks that Plato assigns to the soul. I have also repeatedly suggested that the description of these tasks, and indeed their very nature, seems to be at variance with absolute incorporeality as a defining feature of the soul, which Plato himself neither explicitly affirms nor denies. In fact, the need to provide the soul with a number of roles is perhaps

60 See Brown 1998, 203, for a very similar suggestion.

the simplest explanation for why Plato does not develop the soul's ontology beyond what is necessary for the context-sensitive descriptions of its actions and experiences. The richness of these descriptions is unparalleled, but it is their variety that makes it difficult to extract from them one coherent picture. Our typical response to this problem is to argue that Plato's stories about the soul are *images* of the true soul and must be understood as such. This intuition is certainly correct, not in the least because Plato himself repeats the same warning. Unfortunately, its truth does not include a method of arriving at the "true soul" itself. The reason for this is that Plato's images of the soul (some of which I will return to in detail in Chapter 5) repeatedly re-enact the tension between our intuitions and our more articulate theories. More specifically, what stands in the way of a fully articulated theory of the soul is the tension between the refined notion of ontological incorporeality and the robust understanding of the soul as a person-like moral agent.

As we saw in Chapter 2, this tension becomes clear when the soul performs actions relevant to its morally underpinned immortality. This context invites complications that seem even more difficult than the technical issues such as the soul's spatiality or tridimensionality, although the latter, insofar as it is linked with the soul's internal division, may be more of a problem than some readers assume.⁶¹ In any case, several dialogues, including the *Timaeus*, certainly disregard the general connection between incorporeality and simplicity established in the *Phaedo*. For some interpreters, this follows from a shift in Plato's views: in the earlier dialogues, Plato treats soul and body simply as two separate substances; in the later dialogues, the soul acquires spatial properties, which also better explains the soul's ability to move bodies. This perspective may have its appeal but, on the basis of our present inquiry, it seems important to insist that the spatial features of the soul and the explicit appeal to its composite character in the *Timaeus* do not solve the puzzle of the soul's proper nature, and the same is true about *Laws* x and the *Sophist*. Regardless of the novelty of the descriptions of the soul in all these dialogues, the resulting situation is ultimately the same as in the so-called earlier dialogues.

Plato's different perspectives on the soul thus point to a larger dilemma, the two horns of which offer us equal advantages and disadvantages. If we

61 See above on the *Timaeus*. The composite character of the soul in the latter makes this problem different from the modern issue of the spatiality of the *simple* indivisible soul as discussed in Descartes, Leibniz or Kant. On the spatiality of the soul in Kant and his predecessors, see Bennett 1974, 82–92, and Hessbrüggen-Walter 2014.

say that the soul is incorporeal, we gain a direct explanation of its invisibility and intangibility, and a reasonable basis for assuming that it may also be simple – a good step towards the soul's immortality based on its indestructibility. On the other hand, this perspective is rather weak in explaining the soul's capacity to act on something that is not a soul. If we assume that the soul need not be incorporeal in every possible respect, we get a better picture of how it acts on the body, and we better understand how its immortality is related to its self-motion. On the downside, we have no idea about the nature of the stuff the soul would be made of; it would be some kind of matter, but nothing like the matter we know from experience or can deduce in the science of physics.

All things considered, the result of our investigation is a draw. What tips the balance towards incorporeality is either the moral imperative of purification or the need to integrate the soul into a more systematic metaphysics. The former option seems to prevail not only in Plato himself, but also in the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*.⁶² The latter option is at work in the Neoplatonists such as Proclus, whose *Elements of Theology* present us with the complete argumentative sequence that goes from the soul's self-motion (conceived as a capacity to revert upon itself) to its immortality and incorporeality based on its complete separability from bodies (*Elem. Theol.* 15–16).⁶³ A complete sequence of this kind is never established in the dialogues. Concerning soul and incorporeality, Plato is more cautious and, in dialogues as diverse as the *Phaedo* or the *Timaeus*, he describes the soul as a true agent that acts both inside and outside us, animating human persons while keeping its metaphorical eye on the cosmic coordinates. Again, this does not mean that Plato does not conceive of the soul as incorporeal. But it makes us more aware of the problems inherent in such a conception, and enables us to understand why Plato is careful and only describes the soul *as if* it were such.

62 In *Epinomis*, we learn that nothing except soul, which is of a single form (μορφὴν μίαν), “could possibly be incorporeal (ἀσώματον) and entirely without any color at all (χρῶμα οὐδὲν οὐδαμῶς οὐδέποτε ἔχον)” (981b5–7). The emphasis is on the soul's active nature: the soul actively fashions the compound of body and soul, using the five solid bodies (984b–c). The framework is similar to *Laws* x including the focus on celestial beings whose souls have the unwavering and most powerful intellect (982b5–6). We are also told that the celestial bodies could not perform their complex motions “unless a soul is attached to each of them or resides in each (ἐν ἑκάστοις)” (983b–c). This is partially reminiscent of *Laws* x and the different options for how the soul moves the sun. On the difficulties that we face when reading the *Epinomis*, see Dillon 2003, 183–197.

63 For this whole argument, see Menn 2012, 58.

Transmigration and the World's Balance

The argument developed in previous chapters has insisted that Plato's account of the soul must accommodate its capacity for individual action and moral self-improvement, which are difficult to reconcile with a purely incorporeal being. At this point, we must also take a broader look at how the souls, through their irreducible agency and their capacity for survival, become part of Plato's cosmology. In contrast to numerous studies of the cosmological role of the world soul, less attention has been paid to the cosmological role that Plato assigns, in several dialogues, to individual souls whose lives and rebirths sustain the structure of the universe around us. As far as I can tell, this role has received almost no systematic treatment.¹ This may be because, as Michael Inwood mildly puts it, "the doctrine of reincarnation is not very plausible."² As a result, most analyses ask about the Pre-socratic sources of this doctrine. My aim, however, is to highlight one overlooked rationale for Plato's use of transmigration. Clearly, the cosmological role of individual souls is based on Plato's views of the soul's immortality, which allows for rebirth into *different kinds* of bodies and so into a great many animal species. I will therefore focus on how the variety of rebirths conditions not only the general persistence of life in the universe, but also the structured plurality of mortal species or, in modern parlance, the world's ecosystem.

In contrast to the soul's immortality as such, Plato's statements on this subject are less numerous, but they certainly add another layer to the

1 A recent exception is Campbell 2022b, who argues that "reincarnation is the primary tool that the gods have to ensure the perfection of the cosmos" (643). Although I am sympathetic to the connection between reincarnation and the structure of the cosmos, my view of the gods' role is narrower. In several dialogues, their judgment is crucial for the form of the next incarnation. Yet, with the possible exception of *Laws* x, 903c (on which see note 4 below), no other mention is made of the gods modifying their judgments in view of the overall cosmic balance. I will return to *Laws* x, 903b–905c, in this book's Conclusion (Chapter 6). In the present context, it should be added that, with the singular exception of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, the gods are never said to have instituted the whole scheme of reincarnation. In any case, Campbell's article deserves recognition for taking this scheme seriously and discussing the role it plays in both Plato's natural philosophy and his ethics.

2 Inwood 2009, 35. For an overview, see, e.g., Casadesús Bordoy 2011.

ethical significance of immortality. In this case, however, the discussion extends beyond human moral concerns. Paradoxically, and somewhat darkly, the transmigration of souls that conditions the variety of living species must rely on constant moral failure of a sufficient number of humans.³ What is good for the whole universe is therefore not necessarily good for the human person and “their” soul. This step beyond the human-centered morality is most explicit in the *Timaeus*, but I will start with the *Phaedo*, and then turn to the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*.⁴ In these dialogues, Socrates or Timaeus speak about transmigration in different contexts and at various lengths. What seems to connect these cases is the ambiguity of human situation, including its key role in the world, an ambiguity that is expressed precisely in the tension between the good of the universe and the human good. The following four sections will take a closer look at how Plato articulates this tension in different dialogues and how he describes the soul’s standing in between the human world and the other layers of the universe. This chapter’s concluding section will then summarize the relation between Plato’s versions of transmigration and the maintenance of the world’s diversity, which Plato may not appreciate for its own sake but sees as indispensable to the intrinsically valuable universe as a true cosmos.

3 Hence, the occasional resistance to the idea that the non-human species that complete the universe depend, in their very existence, on the fall of the previously human souls in animal bodies. See, e.g., Johansen 2004, 148: to suppose that “the irrational affections [sc. the cause of moral failure] would be hypothetically necessary in order to ensure that lower animals would be created” would put “a very negative interpretation on the work of the lesser gods” who “would deliberately act so as to make us irrational.” In contrast, my reading will accentuate a non-anthropocentric point of view, of which such a partial “negativity” is an integral part. For a similar view, see, e.g., Brill 2015, 170: “human failure, that is, the unsuccessful completion of human life, not only is woven into the fabric of the cosmos but is required by it, since without this failure the cosmos would be incomplete.” Cf. also Thein 2006, 243, on “the ‘some must fail’ principle that assures the plenitude of the world on the level of life forms that are intellectually lower than man.”

4 I will leave aside the *Meno* and the *Laws*. The *Meno* offers no scheme of transmigration, even if its quotation of Pindar about the return of the souls from Hades makes it an important source for Plato’s relation to the tradition of metempsychosis. On the *Meno* and transmigration, see, e.g., Long 1948, 149–151. As for the *Laws*, the mention of transmigration in Book X, 903c, makes no use of other than human reincarnations, but the talk about residences” and “bodies” is both too elliptic and too general for us to be certain. Of course, the apparent focus on humans may follow from the context and its crucial emphasis on the gods’ concern with human affairs that they manage with a view to the good of the whole (X, 899d–903a). For more on this text, see Saunders 1973, Macé 2006, 210–213, Stalley 2009, Mayhew 2008, 170–184.

1 The *Phaedo*

The main focus of the *Phaedo* is immortality in relation to the soul of the human individual. This ethical framework includes transmigration insofar as the latter is a necessary corollary of the soul's eternality *and* of the mortality of soul-body compounds: if life on earth is to go on, souls simply must return to animate future individual bodies. The ethical concern, which is similar to the one of the *Republic* (the unjust cannot just win and die happy, *Phaedo* 107c–d), is thus predominant, and transmigration is discussed much more briefly and in two different contexts. The first one is the cyclical argument (this label is due to Olympiodorus),⁵ which is Socrates' first attempt not only to articulate but also to justify his hope that our souls survive after our death (70c–72e). It is here that Socrates makes the connection between transmigration and larger cosmological issues, more precisely the role that the souls play in maintaining the world's equilibrium. In the second, more directly ethical context, Socrates then reveals that previously human souls could be reborn in animal bodies. This is what we learn at 81e–82b, before the dialogue's final myth (107d–114c) offers some further remarks about reincarnation. Put together, these two contexts imply that there is a moral economy at work in the particular rebirths, but also that the latter serve a larger, and more formally determined, cosmic purpose. As the souls move up or down the scale of different mortal species, they support the existence of a stable and internally structured universe.

In the cyclical argument, souls appear as an integral part of the physical universe. In this respect, the argument is rather divorced from the issue of individual morality that so often prevails in the dialogue. Instead, its account of the soul's survival is reminiscent of some Presocratic authors, insofar as we can reconstruct their views on the matter.⁶ Although Socrates has

5 Barnes 1978, 398 n. 2, is right that Olympiodorus' other name for this argument, namely "the argument from opposites", is the more suitable one. I will nevertheless stick to its more common label.

6 Such a reconstruction is far beyond the scope of this chapter. It would have to focus on not only Heraclitus (see Finkelberg 2013) or Empedocles (see Hladký 2018 and Casella 2019), but also on Parmenides' view of what Tor 2020, 75–79, calls "the cyclical conveyance of souls"; on Heraclitus and the *Phaedo*, see Sassi 1996 and Rowett 2017. I also leave aside the issue of the *Phaedo*'s relation to Pythagoreanism and Orphism since my interest is in transmigration and its cosmological role in Plato alone. On the Pythagoreans and transmigration, see Cornelli 2016 and Cornelli 2021, with further references. And see Pellò 2018 on, among other things, the difference between Pythagoras and Plato. Horky 2021 strongly denies the existence of an early Pythagorean doctrine of the soul's immortality in

already introduced the Forms at 65d–e, the cyclical argument relies on the generation from contraries that leaves them entirely aside (with the exception of a possible hint at 70e, which has no impact on the unfolding of the argument). This omission will be corrected in the modified account of physical change that posits the contrary Forms as changeless principles of becoming (103a–b), but this correction will contain nothing new on the issue of souls circulating between “here” and “there”. What will remain in place is the general structure of all becoming that occurs on a scale between the contraries. As a result, both the cyclical argument and the dialogue’s final argument, despite their different ways of approaching the question of immortality, presuppose the same view of transmigration in the sense of the soul’s repeated reincarnation. However, only the cyclical argument connects the transmigration to the state of the cosmos as a whole. I will therefore concentrate on this side of the cyclical argument.

The cyclical argument is explicitly introduced as a piece of an “ancient saying” (παλαιὸς λόγος), which Socrates uses for his purposes without replacing it with any new hypothesis of his own (he proceeds to such a replacement only in the final argument, once the ancient doctrines are shown to be insufficient). This situation creates ambiguities due to the twofold use of the verb γίγνομαι in the sense of both “come to be” and “acquire a property”. Simply put, Socrates’s presentation of the “ancient saying” will ignore the distinction between alteration and unqualified generation or destruction.⁷ However, before this confusion arises, Socrates first establishes what exactly his subsequent argument should confirm:

Let’s see whether or not it turns out that when people have died their souls exist in Hades. Now there is an ancient saying which comes to mind, that souls exist there when they have come from here, and that they come back here and come to be from the dead (καὶ πάλιν γε δεῦρο ἀφικνοῦνται καὶ γίγνονται ἐκ τῶν τεθνεώτων). If this is so – that the living come to be again from those who have died (πάλιν γίγνεσθαι ἐκ τῶν ἀποθανόντων τοὺς ζῶντας) – surely our souls would exist there? For, I take it, the souls would not come to be again, if they did not exist (οὐ

the sense of true everlastingness, but acknowledges the possible difference between such a doctrine and the belief in transmigration.

7 More surprisingly, it will also imply a certain confusion between soul and human being, on which see below. Greco 1996 offers the most relevant analysis of the problem of opposites, including the issue of contraries and contradictories and its impact on the coming-to-be “from the dead”, which is also discussed below.

γὰρ ἂν που πάλιν ἐγίγνοντο μὴ οὔσαι). And so it would be evidence enough of the truth of this, should it really come to be clear that the living come to be from nowhere other than from the dead (οὐδαμῶθεν ἄλλοθεν γίγνονται οἱ ζῶντες ἢ ἐκ τῶν τεθνεώτων). But if this is not true, we would need some other argument. (70c4–d5)⁸

The perhaps most striking feature of this passage is the uncertain distinction between souls and human beings. While Socrates repeats the crucial assertion (“the living are born from the dead”) no less than three times, it is unclear who or what “the dead” are. Taken literally, the quoted lines would seem to propose a zombie theory of immortality as post-mortem existence in another place, which would be quite like the Homeric Hades, where those who were once alive now possess a sort of shadowy existence.⁹ The difference from this traditional image of Hades would consist in the return of these shadowy beings to full life: living people would be generated “again” from dead people.

This is obviously not what Socrates means. The context makes it clear that his intention is to demonstrate that the presently living human beings receive the *source* of their life from elsewhere, namely Hades, from where the *souls*, not people, return to the visible bodies. However, in order for his demonstration to succeed and to clarify the quoted passage, Socrates needs to establish a firmer theoretical framework, which he provides in his next step, whereby he invites us to enlarge the scope of our considerations:

if you want to understand more easily, don't consider this with regard to humans only, but in relation to all animals and plants too. In short, concerning everything that has a coming-to-be (ἔχει γένεσιν), let us see whether they all come to be (γίγνεται πάντα) in this way: the opposites from nowhere other than their opposites (οὐκ ἄλλοθεν ἢ ἐκ τῶν ἐναντίων τὰ ἐναντία) – all those, that is, that actually have an opposite, as for example the beautiful is surely opposite to the ugly, and just to unjust, and there are countless others like this (καὶ ἄλλα δὴ μυρία οὕτως ἔχει). So let's consider whether everything that has an opposite necessarily comes to be from nowhere other than from its opposite. For example, whenever something comes to be larger, I presume that

8 I quote the *Phaedo* from Sedley and Long 2011, with occasional modifications.

9 Dorter 1982, 34 correctly emphasizes that Socrates' picture of Hades differs greatly from Homer's; as Socrates puts it at 80d6–7, he speaks about “Hades as it truly is:” a divine region welcoming purified souls.

it is necessarily from being smaller before that the thing later comes to be larger? (70d7–e8)

To Cebes' affirmative answer, Socrates adds further examples of opposites coming to be from their opposites: being weaker from being stronger, being faster from being slower, being worse from being better, and being more just from being more unjust (71a3–7). In these and similar cases, the process of becoming can happen in both directions, as in, for instance, the increasing and decreasing, the detaching and combining, the cooling and heating (71b6–7). The general structure of change that Socrates intends to clarify before turning explicitly to the soul and its life is therefore clear: the opposites “come to be from one another” and “there is a process of coming-to-be of each into the other” (71b9–10).¹⁰

Since this is only a prelude to the argument focused on the soul, Socrates' progress is rather rough, without any emphasis on the fact that this initial exposition, while speaking about *genesis*, concerns only the change of the opposite properties and not the generation and destruction of the bearers of these properties. Unless we assume that those bearers are entirely reducible to mixtures of physical elements, it seems clear that, unlike the opposite properties that come naturally *in degrees*, the bearers of these properties have no opposites, and they *either* exist *or* do not exist: Socrates and Phaedo have varying degrees of largeness and smallness, but they have not different degrees of being human. Socrates' smallness was not born and will not be destroyed in the same sense as Socrates himself. It is Socrates, or indeed any animal or plant, that underwent a birth and will undergo a destruction or death in the simple, absolute sense. On this point, the argument gives no clarification, but it is a point that is fundamental for the issue of the soul's *individual* survival, and, later in the dialogue, Socrates and Simmias will agree, quite emphatically, that all souls are “this very thing, soul” (αὐτὸ τοῦτο εἶναι, ψυχὴν) in the same degree, never more or less (93b5–7).¹¹ Different souls thus exhibit various degrees of opposite properties (e.g., being wise or unwise, just or unjust), but their being soul is *not* a matter of degree. This fundamental point has been intuitively clear from the beginning of the

10 Sedley 2012, with additional references, is a thorough analysis of the theory of change in *Phaedo* 70–71.

11 Cf. Chapter 2.1 on a formally parallel passage about the bee in *Meno* 72b: various bees do not differ because of a difference in being bees, but “because of something else, such as beauty or largeness or something else of that kind”. In other words, “in so far as they are bees, one bee doesn't differ at all from another.”

dialogue, for the *Phaedo* does not primarily ask whether souls can become such and such (they obviously can), but whether souls, *as such*, come-to be and perish. What should be at stake already in the cyclical argument is therefore immortality as something that is not acquired only to a degree, but belongs to the very being of the soul: by definition, to be immortal means to be immortal *entirely*.¹²

It is the dialogue's final argument that will be tailor-made to demonstrate this last point by understanding being alive as the soul's essential property, which does not admit of degrees and enables the soul to animate the body (105c9–d4). The final argument, however, will build upon Socrates' own hypothesis of Forms as causes, a hypothesis that contrasts with anything that can be characterized as an "ancient saying". The flaws in the preceding reasoning can thus be read, generously, as deliberately attributed to the ancient doctrine or doctrines summarized here. This might also explain why Socrates' next step, which finally turns to life and death, seems to disregard the implication of his own earlier description of death as "something", namely "the separation of the soul from the body", so that "being dead is the following: the body has been separated from the soul and come to be apart, alone by itself, and the soul has been separated from the body and is apart, alone by itself" (64c5–8). From this conception follows the asymmetry between life and death since only the former, but not the latter, is an activity with its own characteristics: at 64c, Socrates describes death as an event of separation with no proper content. As a result, once death occurs, nothing is properly "dead", since the soul continues to live and the body turns into an inanimate physical compound on a par with other things that we take for inanimate but not for "dead", except metaphorically (chairs, for example, are not "dead" in the sense of having died – the body would never be animate without the soul in the first place).¹³

The perspective adopted in the next phase of the cyclical argument is quite different: Socrates begins by establishing that just as sleeping is the opposite of being awake, so there is an opposite to living, namely being dead; and between these opposites, the process of becoming occurs in both directions (71c1–7). Consequently, if being dead and being alive are opposites and if they come from each other, then from that which is living

12 For more on this passage and its far-reaching implications, see Chapter 2.1.

13 The problem persists in the final argument, where Death is posited as the opposite of Life (105e2), and the soul is said to essentially participate in the latter. What, however, would participate in Death? There is certainly nothing that would participate in it in the same *essential* way that the soul participates in Life.

comes that which is dead, and from that which is dead comes that which is living – to which Socrates adds, “it is from those that are dead that both living things and those who are alive come to be” (τὰ ζῶντά τε καὶ οἱ ζῶντες γίγνονται, 71d14–15). Here, it seems that τὰ ζῶντά refers to animals and plants, whereas οἱ ζῶντες to human beings.¹⁴ And this is why Socrates concludes that “then our souls (αἱ ψυχαὶ ἡμῶν) exist in Hades” (71e2).

“Our souls” is a shorthand for “the souls presently incarnated in these human bodies”, but this expression cannot quite compensate for one puzzling implication of the argument: if it is the same human being that falls asleep and wakes up, it should be the same *human being* that dies and comes alive. And if we point out that the argument can very well apply to the soul, which can be said to fall asleep and wake up (metaphorically or not), then the implication is even worse since *the same soul* would die and come alive. This only confirms that the whole argument is so structured that it suggests not continuous immortality, but repeated death and rebirth. For this very reason, it certainly does not warrant the conclusion that “our souls exist in Hades,” a conclusion that presupposes a continuous identity that the argument, thus far, has had nothing to say about.¹⁵ In what follows, Socrates will not try to remedy this issue. Instead, he will speak repeatedly about the rebirth (τὸ ἀναβιώσκεισθαι, 71e13, 72a1–2, 72d8), still without clarifying the status of the soul in between the previous human death and this rebirth.¹⁶ In a sense, this ambiguity could be fatal for the soul’s continuous and individual immortality, but it seems harmless for the cosmological turn that the argument is about to take.

Unexpectedly, this turn begins with Socrates’ appeal to human experience: of the two processes of coming-to-be, one is obvious; in fact, “dying is clear” (τὸ γὰρ ἀποθνήσκειν σαφές) (71e5). This evidence leads us to infer that the opposite process of birth must be symmetrically at work in nature (φύσις) if the latter is not to be unbalanced (71e8–10). What is neither clear nor easy to infer is Socrates’ following assertion that there is indeed such a thing as “rebirth” or “returning to life”, and that this return consists in “a process of coming-to-be from the dead to the living” (ἐκ τῶν τεθνεώτων ἄν

14 For the same reading of 71d14–15, see Rowe 1993, 159.

15 See Crombie 1963, 295–297. Cf. Dixsaut 1991, 341 n. 119, Greco 1996, 239, and also Barnes 1978, 411–412, on several equivocal statements concerning “our souls” in Hades.

16 The myth of the *Statesman*, where the Visitor recurs to a very similar language while talking about the rebirth from the earth of those human beings who died in the previous cosmic period (271b6; 272a1), is of no help since it does not concern the status of the soul.

εἴη γένεσις εἰς τοὺς ζῶντας, 71e14–72a1). In this new phrasing, the opposite of dying is clearly described as *genesis* in the sense of the birth of something that was not alive before, and Socrates' repeated use of the verb ἀναβιώσκεισθαι reinforces this impression. At the same time, however, the expression "from the dead" remains as unclear as before, although it is easy, and probably right, to read it simply as a metonymy for "from Hades". However, the concept of balance in nature can be expressed without the recourse to the return from Hades, as Socrates' own formulation of this balance perhaps unwittingly implies:

Suppose the one set of things did not always balance the other by coming to be, going round in a circle, as it were (ὥσπερ εἰ κύκλῳ περιιόντα), but instead the process of coming-to-be were a straight line from the one to its opposite only, and did not bend back again (μὴ ἀνακάμπτοι πάλιν) to the former or turn in its course. Do you realize that then all things in the end would have the same form (τὸ αὐτὸ σχῆμα), be in the same condition (τὸ αὐτὸ πάθος), and stop coming to be? (72a12–b6)

By comparing the balance in nature to a circle rather than a straight motion in both directions, Socrates introduces a new image, which he reinforces by evoking a convex bending that also suggests a circularity rather than a simple reversal of the motion in a straight line.¹⁷ The talk about everything or "all things" (πάντα) now accentuates the cosmic undertones inherent in the evocation of the cycle of generation. At the same time, this whole scheme of symmetry in nature would still be easy to reconcile with the idea that while some things die, other things come to be living, without the assumption that something survives through the whole cycle.¹⁸ Such a scheme, in which new living things are constantly born to compensate for the equally constant loss of life, would imply that "nature" is self-sufficient regardless of the soul's condition, in other words that souls would die and be born just

17 Aristotle will use a very similar language when speaking about *Timaeus* 36b–c and the demiurge's bending of the straight line into a circle (*On the Soul* I 3, 407a30); and cf. *On the Generation and Corruption* II 10, 337a1–337a7, and *Meteorology* IV 9, 385b28–386a8, for such "bending" and natural processes with cosmic signification.

18 On this point, see Greco 1996, 240. On the problem of asserting that we (who used to be alive) exist when we are dead, see also Barnes 1978, 416–417, and Gallop 1982, 212–214.

like other parts or ingredient of “nature”. The latter would therefore be the self-regulating agent of cosmic changes. Yet, here as elsewhere, Plato’s insistence on the return from Hades implies that it is the numerically and individually identical souls, and not *phusis* as a general principle of regular change, that maintain the continuity of life. Socrates’ reasoning assumes that what lives cannot be born from what was previously inanimate, so that only life – regardless of its passage through Hades – can beget life. This crucial assumption of the cyclical argument is partly obscured by its linguistic ambiguities, but the end of the argument will make it clear that what underlies all *natural* change is an ensemble of agents – souls – that are exempt from the change that consists in individual generation and destruction.

Before reaching the final stage of his argument, Socrates briefly returns to the analogy with falling asleep and waking up, where the former, analogous to death, stands for the danger of a progressively generalized sleep of everything that has been alive (72b8–c2). At this point, this analogy adds little to the argument, and Socrates quickly turns to another and more general formulation, including the argument’s only reference to a historical figure:

Also, if everything underwent combining, but not detaching, soon Anaxagoras’ saying would have come true: “all things together”. In the same way too, my dear Cebes, if everything that partook in living were to die, and if, when they had died, the dead were to remain in that form and not return to life, wouldn’t it be absolutely unavoidable for everything in the end to be dead and nothing alive? For if living things came to be from the other things, and if the living things died, how could they be prevented from all being expended and ending up dead? (72c2–d7)

Although the lexical ambiguities noted above persist, one thing is increasingly clear: the change that Socrates is talking about here is *not* a matter of degree. In contrast to, say, the process of becoming smaller, which could, in principle, go on indefinitely, the process of dying would result in everything being simply dead (rather than “deader still”). There would be an end state, a generalized entropy, which would be averted only by the rebirth in the sense of the return of the souls from Hades. In this context, the evocation of Anaxagoras’ description of the *initial* state of all things is an interesting thought experiment that *reverses* the direction of Anaxagorean cosmogony. Using the beginning of Anaxagoras’ treatise – which coincides with a starting point of the world’s differentiation – to summarize how the universe would end, Socrates offers a subtle critique of his predecessor’s account of

how the present universe came to be.¹⁹ Socrates does not explicitly state, but clearly implies in his subsequent arguments, that the processes of combining and detaching (διακρίνεσθαι καὶ συγχρίνεσθαι) do not apply to soul as he understands it.²⁰ It seems that Socrates relies here on the previous discussion of death as a separation that takes body and soul neatly apart, and each truly on its own terms (see again 64c5–8: “the body has been separated from the soul and come to be apart, alone by itself, and the soul has been separated from the body and is apart, alone by itself.”). It is then legitimate to assume that the soul’s union with the body is not a mixture and its separation from the body is not an extraction from such a mixture, even if the soul’s union with a body changes a number of its opposite properties, including the moral ones. Against this background, Socrates can finally be more affirmative concerning the soul’s properly individual survival in Hades and its return:

And we’re not deluded in agreeing to this precise account, but these are all facts: coming back to life, the living come to be from the dead, the souls of the dead exist (τάς τῶν τεθνεώτων ψυχὰς εἶναι), and the good souls are better off whereas the bad ones worse off (καὶ ταῖς μέν γε ἀγαθαῖς ἀμεινον εἶναι, ταῖς δὲ κακαῖς κάκιστον). (72d7–10)

These are the concluding words of the cyclical argument, words that remind Cebes of the issue of recollection to which the dialogue swiftly turns. It is noteworthy, therefore, that this summary introduces two narrowly connected claims that could hardly be derived from the appeal to the structure of change between two opposites. The first claim is encapsulated in a single sentence: “the souls of the dead exist.” This means that the soul that animated a living human being that is now dead truly retains its independent existence. Moreover, this existence is then specified by the second claim, which may seem completely unexpected: this continued existence is better for the good souls and worse for the bad ones.

19 Cf. Flores 2020, 130.

20 Rowe 1993, 158, correctly states that, already at 71b6–7, it is unclear what the opposites are in the case of detaching and the combining (διακρίνεσθαι καὶ συγχρίνεσθαι). Even here, at 72c3–5, it is impossible to simply identify detaching and combining with dying and rebirth, at least insofar as body and soul do not form a mixture in the usual physicalist sense. The souls may have close or distant *moral* relation to the body (in the *Phaedo*, badness is described as proximity to the body and its desires), but this does not imply that the soul would directly enter a corporeal elemental mixture. That the *Phaedo* avoids describing the soul as fully incorporeal makes no difference in this case.

This concluding moral claim has sometimes been excised as an insertion from 63c6–7. On a closer inspection, however, it has its logical place at the close of the cyclical argument that began with Socrates' reminder of the widespread belief in the soul's existence in Hades (71c4–5). Moreover, the concluding moral claim situates the cyclical argument within the dialogue's overall progress, and the repetition of the words from 63c6–7 has precisely this role: they were first used to express Socrates' "good hope" (εὖελπς) "that there is something in store for the dead and, as we have long been told, something much better for the good than for the bad" (63c5–7). The cyclical argument amounts thus to the first attempt to give the "ancient" belief a properly "modern" philosophical underpinning.²¹

Why is this important for our main subject, the transmigration and its role in the maintenance of a well-ordered cosmos? By giving equal weight to the soul's survival and its reincarnation, the cyclical argument opens the way to a broad panorama of transmigration, where the souls' circulation in the cosmos and their entrance into *various* kinds of bodies, will be the linchpin of the dynamic balance in nature. This balance will be guaranteed on moral grounds, without any reliance on the self-sustaining, self-regulating *phusis*.²² The rich tapestry of life within this universe will ultimately depend not only on the survival of souls but on their different moral qualities, from which the *whole* process of transmigration will derive its particular schedule. The next step towards such a scheme must lead beyond the polarity of the living and the dead, and towards the possibility for the good and the bad souls to reincarnate in different kinds of bodies.

This possibility is first affirmed at the end of the so-called affinity argument, whose rather convoluted progress ends up by establishing that the soul is akin and similar to what is invisible, incomposite, and always in the same condition (78b–80b). The soul exhibits a natural proximity to these truly perfect beings, but is not one of them: in virtue of being "more similar" to them than to the body, the soul is never described as entirely incorporeal,

21 On why not to omit the argument's final moral claim (present in the manuscripts), see Sedley and Long 2011, 61 n. 26, and, in more detail, Pakaluk 2003, 109–110, who also points out the connection to the purification as discussed at 80d–81c (see below).

22 The strongest role of *phusis* in the *Phaedo* concerns the superiority of the soul over the body (see 80a1–2). Tellingly, this superiority comes from the soul's similarity to what is divine and transcends the realm of *phusis*. Together with the dialogue's first part, this passage suggests an analogy where the soul is to the body as the gods are to human beings. For more on this and related issues, see Chapter 2.2.

but only as striving to get as far away from composite bodies as possible.²³ Importantly, the soul's purity, unlike its immortality, is indeed a matter of degree – which is precisely what allows Socrates to suggest the option of a perfect, strictly philosophical purification, which will be described, in the final myth, as promising the release from future reincarnation (114c).²⁴ In contrast, all those “who did not pursue philosophy” let their soul depart in a tainted condition (82b10–c6), and it is the variety of such contamination that accounts for the souls' various misadventures after the death of their human hosts. At 81d–82a, Socrates suggests that some wicked souls keep oscillating between here and Hades until their reincarnation, and then sketches a scale of depravity and ignorance that determines the next incarnation: from gluttons, reckless types, and drunks who will be embodied as donkeys and similar species, he passes to those who are inclined to injustice, tyranny, or thievery and will become wolves, hawks, and kites. At 82a–b, Socrates adds other soul-types and other animal species, again on the basis of the similarity of their observable behavior: virtuous non-philosophers, temperate and just as they are, will thus come “back into a civic and tame species like themselves, that of bees, I suppose, or wasps or ants, or even back into the very same one, the human race.”²⁵

If it is difficult to take this passage seriously in all its colorful detail, its underlying idea is more than an object of Plato's “savage irony”.²⁶ While this idea is sketched rather than fully developed, it is clear that its main methodological device consists in depicting different animal kinds as projections of human vices and virtues. In this respect, Socrates is reworking not so much a precise philosophical eschatology as current views about the correspondence between human and animal physiognomic, *and hence moral*, features.²⁷ These views are relocated into the broader eschatological

23 Hence also the rather uncanny conclusion that the soul is “the sort of thing to be altogether incapable of being disintegrated, or nearly so” (80b9–10). For more on this conclusion and its relation to the issue of soul and incorporeality, see Chapter 3.2.

24 Lines 82b10–c1 even suggest that such souls will become divine by “coming into the race of gods” (εἰς δὲ γε θεῶν γένος).

25 Dixsaut 1991, 355 n. 176, notices the correspondence between the three groups of soul distinguished here and the three parts of the soul in *Republic* IV, 439a–441d.

26 For “savage irony”, see Gallop 1975, 144, who takes this irony to be directed at the Pythagoreans.

27 Interestingly enough, an early author concerned with physiognomy was none other than Phaedo of Elis. See Boys-Stones 2004. I cannot deal here with ancient physiognomy, but one passage from the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics* sums up its core idea: “There never was an animal with the form of one kind and the mental character of another: the soul and body appropriate to the same kind always go together, and

frame, much like they will be in the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, or the *Timaeus*. As we will see, these dialogues differ in their criteria for the particular forms of reincarnation, and in the temporal intervals pertinent to the cosmic timetable of souls. Yet these differences derive from the main issue discussed in the dialogue in question, and they never contradict the basic need for transmigration as a means of maintaining the biodiversity of a well-calibrated universe. Consequently, the issue of transmigration may have a strong moral dimension, and yet no individual soul is free to decide its “postmortem” fate. It can certainly prepare for and influence it through its actions, but the real outcome is decided as if from a higher instance that takes into account, first and foremost, the immutable laws of the universe. For instance, the *Phaedo* is ready to ascribe the philosophical soul an exceptional status that makes it eligible for future divinization, but the latter should be a by-product of a philosophical success and *not* the intentional end of philosophizing since a philosopher is not virtuous only in order to obtain a future prize.²⁸

As we will see, the *mise-en-scène* of reincarnation is different in the *Republic*, but even there an argument is presented that limits the freedom of choice and, as a result, assures the balanced distribution of different kinds of lives throughout the universe. In the *Phaedo*, the final myth describes the souls’ destinations in a way that produces precisely this outcome, despite some hints at the possibility that life as we know it – one of the soul-body compounds – may indeed one day come to an end. This is because, according to the myth, the truly pure or extremely vicious souls can be excluded from future reincarnation: the philosopher would enjoy the former fate (114c2–6); the worst sacrilegious offenders and murderers would suffer the latter (113e1–6). Some readers see this exceptionality as one of the myth’s inconsistencies concerning reincarnation or, at least, different forms of reward and punishment.²⁹ These specific and presumably rare cases, on the

this shows that a specific body involves a specific mental character” (805a) (trans. Thomas Loveday and Edward Forster).

28 In fact, as Austin 2019 persuasively argues, the *Phaedo* does not contradict the view expressed in *Apology* 40c4–41c6, namely that, *for an individual*, death would be a benefit even in the absence of an afterlife.

29 See Gallop 1975, 224. More severely, Annas 1982, 125–129, sees the whole myth and its ethics of judgment as “confused and confusing”. *Pace* Annas, I agree with Brill 2012, 97 n. 25, that “the main work of the theme of reincarnation” is “to supply Socrates with some means of distinguishing between kinds of souls”, and also that this distinction is reinforced by the myth’s cosmography; as a result, the myths “moves from characterizing different psychological conditions as akin to animals to characterizing different

other hand, seem to be presented also as clear and striking paradigms of moral virtue and vice: figures that make the reader visualize the opposite endpoint of the equally opposite pathways through human life.³⁰ As such, despite the logical possibility that, in the long run, they might deplete the reservoir of reincarnating souls, the eternal rewards and punishments, efficient as moral exemplars, present no danger to the general scheme that is meant to ensure and organize the return of souls to different earthly bodies. After all, Socrates states quite plainly that it is near the Acherusian lake that “the souls of most of those who have died (τῶν τετελευτηκότων ψυχαὶ τῶν πολλῶν) come and stay for certain ordained times, longer in some cases, shorter in others, and then are sent away to be born as living creatures (πάλιν ἐκπέμπονται εἰς τὰς τῶν ζώων γενέσεις)” (113a2–6).

Since it is impossible to offer here a true exegesis of the myth with its richly detailed cosmography, I only wish to stress that the core of Socrates' unusually elaborate description consists in the web of correspondences between the types of souls and their environments.³¹ This large-scale ecology projects the souls onto a different plane of existence, which consists of many marvels (hollow spaces, fires, hot lava, airs, winds, seas, lakes, rivers, springs, and so on), all invisible to us in our present condition and apparently crafted in the service of moral cosmology. The detailed topography that traces the paths of souls in their afterlives is a clear magnification of terrestrial and marine wonders, and it is its very variety that prepares the return of different souls to their equally different earthly bodies. In other words, it is the souls' different *degrees* of perfection and imperfection that translate, by means of reincarnation, into the existence of different *kinds* of animals. The resulting hierarchy of mortal creatures, whose imperfection is thought to increase with their distance from human beings, has its own function: on another level, these degrees of imperfection become equally important parts of a perfect cosmic whole. If the *Timaeus* formulates this double bind most clearly, all four dialogues that introduce the reincarnation

psychological conditions on the basis of geographic features.” On how these perspectives complement each other, see the concluding section of this chapter.

30 Cf. *Gorgias* 525c–d on the incurable, painfully punished wrongdoers exposed in Hades as *paradeigmata* to be contemplated by all unjust souls; cf. the exposed criminals in *Republic* x, 615e–616a. The *Phaedo* also mentions the peculiar case of those who may leave Tartarus only when pardoned by their victims (114b2–6). On the souls' paths before reincarnation, see Edmonds 2004, 217–218 n. 179. For more on the myth's geography and also reincarnation, see Pender 2012, 229–232 (with a criticism of Edmonds and Annas).

31 Gee 2020, 243–276, offers a detailed discussion of this correspondence.

into different living species seem to share its main assumption that, in our universe, different kinds of lives complete each other.

In this context, the term “ecosystem” is less anachronistic than it might seem, at least if we take it in its basic sense of a community of living beings interacting with each other and with their physical environment. On Plato’s understanding, such a community is irreducible to naturalized cosmologies, mainly because of the redefined role of the souls. The latter are endowed with the twofold activity of thinking *and* motion, and it is this twofoldness that gives the souls their truly individual cosmic agency. The fact that many souls contribute to the balance of the universe through their moral failure is certainly the source of some tension between Plato’s ethics and his cosmology. This tension will also be most apparent in the *Timaeus*, which presents us with its own elaborate cosmic ecosystem. First, however, we need to take a look at transmigration in two other dialogues, namely the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. I will deal with the former in a relatively brief remark, but I will have to say more about the latter, where both the imperfection and the self-motion of reincarnating souls play a crucial cosmological role.

2 A Remark on the *Republic* and the Myth of Er

If the *Phaedo* states that death without the soul’s survival would be good for the wicked, who could benefit from their vices without future punishment (107c5–8), the *Republic* returns to this point repeatedly. For there to be justice, death must not be an escape for the wicked whose actions will be judged regardless of whether they die sooner or later. This demand for justice, delayed as it may be, comes to the fore in the dialogue’s last book, where Socrates actually revives the previously criticized understanding of justice as giving to each what is appropriate to them. Insufficient as it was on the smaller scale of civic life, this conception of justice returns into play with the expansion of the temporal horizon far beyond politics. Once Socrates turns to “the greatest rewards and prizes for virtue” (608c1–2), he stresses that these cannot take place in “a short time” (ὀλίγος χρόνος), but in “the whole of time” (πᾶς χρόνος) (610c6–d1). This large-scale justice can only make sense against the background of the soul’s long-term identity, which allows the soul not only to survive but to suffer the consequences of actions attributable to the human being of which the soul in question was a part.

This identity and the correlative conception of justice concern the soul as an individual agent, which is very similar to what the human agents are. However, even if the *Republic* starts at the level of human individuals, the

moral requirements relevant to human life can be used to reinforce the structure of the universe as consisting of various living species. In this respect, what is important for our issue are less the rewards and punishments of the souls for their past deeds than the whole panorama of the choice of their *future* lives, a panorama that is unique in Plato's dialogues in naming particular souls and their choices. The following remarks do not offer a detailed reading of this panorama but focus on the individual souls and their choice of a given life, and also on the way in which that choice helps to maintain the diversity of generically immortal life-forms (also, I will return to the myth of Er in Chapter 5.4 while discussing the images of the soul in *Republic* IX and X).³²

The spectacle of choice is described as an integral part of the soul's carefully orchestrated return to earthly bodies. This return is preceded by the gathering of the returning souls on the meadow, where they discuss their experiences of the afterlife (614e–616b) and from where they travel to “a straight column of light” that stretches “over the whole of heaven and earth” and holds together the entire revolution of the universe (616b–c). Of this binding light and its function, Er offers a detailed, fully ecphrastic account that makes us visualize a sort of well-crafted, colorful planetarium.³³ At the heart of this description, and thus the whole celestial structure, is the spindle of Necessity, “by means of which all the revolutions are turned” (616c3–4). And since the last lines of Er's account reveal that the spindle of Necessity is itself directly moved by the three Fates (617c–d), the source of celestial motion is, ultimately, their souls. This is the Fates' fundamental role in the myth, a deeper one than their traditional associations with the past (Lachesis), the present (Clotho), and the future (Atropos). Still, it is telling that it is Lachesis rather than Atropos who has in her lap not only “a number of lots”, but also “a number of models (παράδειγματα) of lives” from which the souls will choose, in the order determined by the lot (617d). Besides the lot, two different things influence this choice. First, each kind of

32 Therefore, I will pay less attention to different kinds of justice in the eschatological myths, including the myth of Er. There is an abundant literature on this subject, including Inwood 2009, who takes into account the angle of reincarnation (“metempsychotic justice” as he puts it). For various perspectives on the myth of Er including the choice of the future life, see also Annas 1982, 129–138, Thein 2001, 99–114, Dorter 2003, Halliwell 2007, Ferrari 2009, Gonzalez 2012, Larivée 2012, McCoy 2012, Brill 2013, 153–162, Delcomminette 2014, Destrée 2014, Macé 2016, Ilievski 2017, Ilievski 2018.

33 I borrow “planetarium” from the analysis of this description in Rivaud 1928. On the whole celestial mechanics including the spindle of Necessity, see Schils 1993, and especially Macé 2016, 69–77.

life has a finite number of instances. The souls are assured that there is a far greater number of options than there are of souls (617e–618a), so that a satisfactory life is available to everyone (619); but it is no less true that the initial conditions of choice seem to be arranged so as to guarantee a variety of lives chosen. Second, and no less importantly, each individual soul bases their choice on their past “personal” experience, whether that experience makes them wish for another similar life, or for a life as different as possible from the last one.

This last point will have some surprising implications, but first we must insist that the conditions summarized above, taken together, frame the choice as broadly deterministic. By “broadly”, I mean that what is determined by past events is not the exact choice of this one life, but the pattern of choices that leads to a generally predictable outcome. Simply put, while it is impossible to predict how each individual soul will choose, it is always predictable how the souls in large numbers will choose. This is also because the souls coming down from the heavens tend to choose less carefully than those who have just suffered their punishments. Indeed, “because of this and because of the chance of the lottery, there was an interchange of goods and evils for most of the souls” (619d5–7). Making sense of even the careless and almost random choices, the whole process reconciles determinism and diversity.³⁴

If, therefore, the Fates as movers guarantee the overall structure of the cosmos, they only oversee a very general framework of how our part of the world will be filled with living, individual creatures. In this frame, all transmigrating souls seem to have an equal say in the matter of the future world’s inhabitants since, remarkably, the souls that come from animal bodies have the same chance to choose as the previously human souls. This is one of the myth’s most striking features, and even more remarkable is the absence of a neat dividing line between the reasons for choosing an animal or a human life. This absence is reinforced by the curious fact that those who seek distance from their previous life may choose the opposite kind of existence in *human* form (Odysseus wants to live as an obscure private individual), while those who wish to extend the kind of existence they once

34 On determinism, see Annas 1982, 133–138, Inwood 2009, 44–46, Ilievski 2018. See also McPherran 2010 on luck and necessity. Socrates says nothing about the rewards or the choices of “the stillborn and those who had lived for only a short time” (615c1–2). These souls would choose at random, but as there would be many of them (in Plato’s time, about one soul in three), this would not compromise the statistically robust scheme.

had, surprisingly often choose to do so in the appropriate *animal* form (Orpheus will be a swan, Thamyris a nightingale, Ajax a lion, Agamemnon an eagle, Thersites a monkey).³⁵

These examples imply that, in the myth of Er, the transmigration of souls into animal bodies need not be a form of punishment, but a genuine choice. The important thing is that, on a large scale, the transmigration guarantees a balanced presence of various mortal species, and also of both sexes. This is confirmed by the summary of the choices, which concludes this part of the myth by reminding us of further permutations: "Still other souls changed from animals into human beings, or from one kind of animal into another, with unjust people changing into wild animals, and just people into tame ones, and all sorts of mixtures occurred" (620d2–5). We find here an echo of *Phaedo* 81e–82a (the unjust turning into wild animals, the just into tame ones), and the overall impression is, precisely, one of the broadest range of individual options within a well-defined cosmic frame. It is obvious that the spectacle of choice exhibits features of both comedy and tragedy, and that the style of the myth has a complex relation to Socrates' previous criticism of poetry.³⁶ No less important for our reading is to notice that the myth of Er offers a lesson in how to allow a degree of randomness into a deterministic framework; and, again, by "deterministic" we refer here to a complex system, or rather a complex process, whose particular steps may not be predictable but the overall outcome is. In other words, Er describes a simultaneously cosmic and psychological arrangement that ensures that imperfect individual souls *unwittingly* contribute to the fulfillment and perpetuation of the world's ecology.

There is no doubt that such an arrangement implies tension between the good of individual souls and the good of the universe as a complex, diversely animated structure. The necessity of individual failure for a certain number of souls in each generation of living beings is a harsh feature of Platonic cosmology, even if we understand that such a failure leads to just punishment. As Julia Annas puts it, "the rewards of justice are part of a vast cosmic pattern; but it is not, from the individual's point of view, an optimistic or encouraging pattern."³⁷ At the same time, the myth of Er offers a more positive appreciation of those kinds of reincarnation that are seen elsewhere as degraded. Becoming a lion or an eagle is a real choice, regardless of its misanthropic motivation. As we will see in the next section, the

35 For the particular examples of lives chosen, see Moors 1988.

36 These aspects of the myth are discussed in, e.g., Segal 1978 and Halliwell 2007.

37 Annas 1982, 134–135.

Phaedrus offers the same option of choosing the life of an animal, although the conditions of this choice are different from the account in the myth of Er. In contrast, no such choice takes place in the *Timaeus*, where transmigration is presented from yet another angle, which connects the diversity of life forms to the ontological difference between the sensible universe and its intelligible model. At the same time, in comparison with the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, both the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* tell us more about the role of souls in the universe and, by implication, about the tension between personal morality and cosmic equilibrium.

3 The *Phaedrus*

In the *Phaedo*, the immortality of the soul averts the danger of the progressive disappearance of life from our part of the universe (72a12–d7). Symmetrically, the *Republic* emphasizes that the immortal souls cannot increase in number so that “everything would end up being immortal” (611a8). The *Phaedrus* echoes this last danger, but in a new form. While affirming the constant number of souls, Socrates seems to suggest that each soul could, in principle, escape the cycle of generation after ten thousand years and stay without an earthly body if it is continuously successful in contemplating the supra-celestial true beings. At the same time, however, Socrates offers an unusually complex scheme of different stages of reincarnation, a scheme that also implies that the escape from reincarnation is highly unlikely.

The complexity of this layered scheme has no parallel in other texts but seems to have received less attention than other aspects of the palinode. Face to its intricacies, the question is how to reconstruct the bigger picture of transmigration, which the palinode reveals in several steps that I will comment upon in this section. To do this properly, it is first necessary to summarize what Socrates says about the soul as such.

At the beginning of his second speech, the palinode, Socrates establishes the starting point (ἀρχή) of his demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) that erotic madness is a gift of gods that ensures our greatest good fortune. And since Socrates claims that to grasp his meaning, “we must first understand the truth about the nature of the soul, divine or human, by examining what happens to it and what it does” (245c2–4), the starting point of the demonstration is the following: “all soul is immortal” (245c5).³⁸ Such is the truth shared by

38 For more on these lines, see Chapter 3.4, with further references.

every soul (or the whole soul); still, even this starting point requires a further gloss: “That is because whatever is always in motion is immortal” (245c5). Only to this laconic claim Socrates finally adds a detailed explanation in order to clarify the connection between immortality and the never-ceasing motion that will be understood as self-motion:

[Whatever is always in motion is immortal] while what moves, and is moved by, something else stops living when it stops moving (παύλαν ἔχον κινήσεως, παύλαν ἔχει ζωῆς). So it is only what moves itself that never desists from motion, since it does not leave off being itself. In fact, this self-mover is also the source and spring of motion (πηγή καὶ ἀρχὴ κινήσεως) in everything else that moves; and a source has no beginning (ἀρχὴ δὲ ἀγένητον). That is because anything that has a beginning comes from some source, but there is no source for this, since a source that got its start from something else would no longer be the source. And since it cannot have a beginning, then necessarily it cannot be destroyed (ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀγένητόν ἐστιν, καὶ ἀδιάφθορον αὐτὸ ἀνάγκη εἶναι). That is because if a source were destroyed it could never get started again from anything else and nothing else could get started from it – that is, if everything gets started from a source. This then is why a self-mover is a source of motion (ἀρχὴ τὸ αὐτὸ αὐτὸ κινοῦν). And [a self-mover] is incapable of being destroyed or being generated; otherwise all heaven and all coming-to-be would collapse, come to a stop, and never find from where to restart its motion (ἢ πάντα τε οὐρανὸν πᾶσάν τε γένεσιν εἰς ἓν συμπεσοῦσαν στήναι καὶ μήποτε αὖθις ἔχειν ὅθεν κινήθέντα γενήσεται). (245c5–e2)

I cannot delve here into the debate about the exact logical structure of this demonstration, let alone into the textual issues.³⁹ The important thing is to realize that Socrates is not trying to prove *that* the soul moves itself. Instead, assuming that the soul is indeed a self-mover, he offers a general argument that does not mention the soul but insists that what moves itself is immortal

39 For a sample of different approaches to the quoted argument, see Bett 1986, Hankinson 1990, Blyth 1997 and Moore 2014, who all discuss further interpretations. On ἀεικίνητον or αὐτοκίνητον at 245c5, see Decleva Caizzi 1970. I will also leave aside the discussion of the true nature of gods in the palinode and the suggestion that its tripartite image of the soul may refer to the division within the rational soul. On the former issue, see Hoinski and Polansky 2014; on the latter, see Carelli 2015. On the image of the soul, see, at least, Pender 2000, 226–229, and Morgan 2012, 333–341.

since its motion, having never begun, can never come to an end. The connection to the soul is provided by the mention of “life” in the first quoted sentence, and it is to the soul and hence life that Socrates will return to at 245e2–3. Before we follow his further reasoning that applies the quoted argument’s conclusion to the soul, it should also be noted that Socrates recurs to a counterfactual thinking (“otherwise all heaven and all coming-to-be would collapse”), which is similar to the lines from *Phaedo* 72a12–b6 and *Republic* x, 611a4–8. In all these cases, the counterfactual scenario outlines the ultimate cosmic catastrophe, which is averted both by the immortality of the soul on the general argumentative level and by repeated transmigration on the level of individual souls.

Importantly, the cosmological background will not disappear with the progressive shift to the activities of individual souls. Just before this shift begins to unfold, Socrates is content to repeat that self-movers are immortal, and then to add that, for precisely this reason, we can safely say that this, i.e., self-motion, is “the essence and definition of a soul” (ψυχῆς οὐσίαν τε καὶ λόγον, 245e3). This implies a general and clean-cut difference between a soul and a body, a difference that evades the issue of corporeality and states simply that only the soul that has neither birth nor death moves itself, whereas bodies are always moved, be it from the outside (so that the body is soulless) or from the inside (so that the body is ensouled). This distinction is certainly not surprising, but perhaps the way that Socrates speaks about the ensouled body and its “having soul” reveals something more: what he says is that “a body whose motion comes from within, from itself, does have a soul, that being the nature (φύσις) of a soul” (245e6). To all ends and purposes, Socrates now concludes that the nature of the soul consists in animating and hence moving a body.

As a result, there is more to the *phusis* of the soul than its *ousia* and *logos* analytically contain. At this point, we can understand why Socrates, just before the beginning of his demonstration, connected this *phusis* to what happens to the soul and to what the soul does (245c3–4). These *pathē te kai erga* are neither more nor less than the content of the individual soul’s everlasting life both within and without the body. They necessarily include everything that happens to the soul in the process of transmigration, including its connection to a human or an animal body. This connection therefore belongs to the soul’s nature, but is not exhaustively captured by its more formal definition in terms of self-motion. The reason is that the nature of the soul implies, much more directly, its relation to that which is *not* the soul, and it is to this relation that Socrates is about to turn. Before doing so, he only adds a caveat about another soul-related term, namely its

idea: a term that can be rendered as “structure” (Nehamas and Woodruff), “form” (Fowler), or “character” (Waterfield), and whose exact and difficult explanation is replaced by an image (246a3–6). This composite image shows “the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer” (246a6–7), and it will soon be clear that this image’s main virtue consists in its capacity to express the inner dynamism of the soul. In this regard, we must recognize that the soul’s *idea* “is the form in which the nature (φύσις) of the soul manifests itself.”⁴⁰

Having introduced the soul’s *phusis* and its correlative *idea*, Socrates can now describe what the ever-moving soul does. His concise introductory account of the soul’s operations in various stages of its existence has the broadest possible range and, as such, it also reminds us of the first difference among the kinds of living beings:

And now I should try to tell you why living thing (ζῷον) is called mortal or immortal. All soul looks after all that lacks a soul (ψυχῇ πᾶσα παντὸς ἐπιμελείται τοῦ ἀψύχου), and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times (πάντα δὲ οὐρανὸν περιπολεῖ, ἄλλοτ’ ἐν ἄλλοις εἶδεσι γιγνομένη). So long as its feathers are in perfect condition it flies high, and is at home in the entire universe is its dominion (πάντα τὸν κόσμον διοικεῖ); but a soul that sheds its feathers wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body (οὗ κατοικισθεῖσα, σῶμα γῆϊνον λαβοῦσα), which then, owing to the power of this soul, seems to move itself. The whole combination (τὸ σύμπαν) of soul and body is called a living thing, and has the designation “mortal” as well. Such a combination cannot be immortal, not on any reasonable account. (246b5–c7)⁴¹

40 Verdenius 1955, 277. Hackforth 1952 does indeed translate ἰδέα as “nature” (which may be a step too far).

41 I leave aside the subsequent remark about the “fiction” that humans form about the gods as being immortal *and* having a body and a soul. My focus will be on the reincarnating souls. As in Chapter 3.4 (p. 90 and n. 41), I modify the translation and correct the usual “wings” to “feathers”. There is no doubt that, in the initial sketch of the soul at 246a, ὑπόπτερος means “winged”, and the following description speaks about a feathered wing (one proper to a bird rather than a bat). The soul’s fall to earth is caused by the loss of *feathers*, not wings. Socrates’ phrasing evokes the molting, not the loss of limbs. So, at 246d3–4, speaking about “what causes the shedding of the wings” sounds awkward. Similarly, at 248b3, πολλὰ δὲ πολλὰ πτερὰ θραύονται does not mean that many souls lose “many wings”; they lose their plumage, i.e., many feathers. In contrast, πτερόν means “wing” in the general statement at 246d6, which concerns

Sketching one segment of the process of transmigration (the soul's entrance into a body), this crucial passage makes this segment part of a bigger picture. The most striking aspect of this picture is the shift to the language of being in charge (*ἐπιμελέομαι*). This "care" is the work of both gods and non-divine souls, and in both cases it does not imply an empathic attitude, but a duty to oversee the universal order (the verbs *περιπολέω* and *κατοικίζω* can be understood here as "to patrol" and "to colonize").⁴² The division of this task between the gods, who patrol the vast vistas of the cosmos and never fall into earthly bodies, and the repeatedly incarnated souls means that souls are active movers on every level of the universe.

The quoted lines thus form the background to what we will learn about the motion of the soul across the universe, a motion whose basic pattern is one of alternating ascent and descent. Divine souls then differ from other souls by the regular pattern of their upward and downward motion, which is both entirely spontaneous and strictly repetitive (246e4–247e6).⁴³ Their ascent is what other souls strive to follow, and it is the measure of success in this enterprise that accounts for the next differentiation among non-divine souls. At 248a1–c2, Socrates offers a colorful description of the difficulties these souls encounter in their effort to ascend to the plain of truth, a description relying on the premise of the soul's natural inclination towards beauty, wisdom, and goodness (246d6–e4, cf. 248b5–c2). Despite the naturalness of this tendency, the souls mostly fail to access what really is, and it is the degree of their failure that determines their upcoming incarnation.

Socrates describes the sorting out of the souls according to the "decree of Adrastea" in descending order, which is derived from the relative success of the souls in contemplating "the true beings" or Forms. Importantly, successful souls who saw at least some of these beings "are unharmed until the next circuit" (*μέχρι τε τῆς ἐτέρας περιόδου εἶναι ἀπῆμονα*), in other words except from incarnation, with no limit concerning the repetition of this success (248c3–5). The laws of destiny are then applied to the less successful souls, resulting in a hierarchy of *human* lives, with animal lives excluded

the upward lift and the analogy between avian flight and the soul's aerodynamics, so to speak.

- 42 The military terminology takes over at 246e4–247a1 where Socrates describes "the army of gods and spirits" with Zeus "the great commander in heaven" who "is looking after everything and putting all things in order."
- 43 Hence, the traditional identification of the ascent of the gods with the rise of celestial bodies. However, the *Phaedrus* itself is silent on any relation between soul-motions and regular celestial motions. The erotic context might explain this silence since the palinode's style is clearly different from the mathematical explanation.

from this initial range of options (see εἰς μηδεμίαν θήρειον φύσιν ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ γενέσει at 248d1–2). It is of course to various human lives that Socrates pays most attention, from the life devoted to wisdom, beauty, or Muses at the top to the life of a tyrant at the bottom (248d2–e3). In all, there are nine ranks of human lives, and it is the way these lives are lived that determines the next fate of the soul. Socrates' presentation of the rules of reincarnations may seem convoluted, and to grasp all the options it accounts for, we need to quote it in full:

Of all these, any who have led their lives with justice will change to a better fate, and any who have led theirs with injustice, to a worse one. In fact, no soul returns to the place from which it came for ten thousand years, since its feathers will not grow before then, except for the soul of a man who practices philosophy without guile or who loves boys philosophically. If, after the third cycle of one thousand years, the last-mentioned souls have chosen such a life three times in a row, they grow their feathers back, and they depart in the three-thousandth year. As for the rest, once their first life is over, they come to judgment; and, once judged, some are condemned to go to places of punishment beneath the earth and pay the full penalty for their injustice, while the others are lifted up by justice to a place in heaven where they live in the manner the life they led in human form has earned them. In the thousandth year both groups arrive at a choice and allotment of second lives, and each soul chooses the life it wants. From there, a human soul can enter a wild animal (εἰς θηρίου βίον), and a soul that was once human can move from an animal to a human being again (ἐκ θηρίου ὃς ποτε ἄνθρωπος ἦν πάλιν εἰς ἄνθρωπον). But a soul that never saw the truth cannot take a human shape (σχῆμα), since a human being must understand what is said in terms of general forms (συνιέναι κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον), proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity (ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῷ συναιρούμενον). This is the recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god, when it disregarded the things we now call real and lifted up its head to what is truly real instead. (248e3–249c4)

Several points of this scheme deserve emphasis, starting with its agreement with the myth of Er. In fact, the two texts could be synthesized into one multilayered story, with the *Phaedrus* as the source of its larger frame (Er's focus is mostly on the choice of lives and on particular cases). However, it is precisely this larger frame, provided by the soul's attempted ascent that

occurs every 10,000 years, that introduces something new in relation to both the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*. This novelty consists in the reshuffling, so to speak, of the souls' destiny by other means than their own choice of their next incarnation. The *Phaedrus* thus combines two ways of determining the soul's next life: first, by measuring its success in ascending to the plain of truth; and second, by the soul's own choice based on its previous experience. In the former case, the celestial ascent determines what kind of human being the soul will animate every ten millennia. In the latter case, after nine out of ten millennia, the soul chooses its next *human or animal* body.⁴⁴

What follows from this scheme is clear: only the experience of human life on earth can determine the choice to live as an animal. As a result, only the second to ninth incarnations produce a complete *scala naturae* that includes all mortal life-forms.⁴⁵ The implication of such a summary is equally obvious: Socrates' account in terms of one cycle framed by the cosmic ascent is, necessarily, a *model* that explains *both* the diversity of human lives *and* the diversity of animal species. Given the immortal soul's permanent self-motion, it is obvious that there cannot be a "first" incarnation. Socrates only begins his account with one ascent and then the subsequent "first" incarnation in order to achieve the clarity of presentation that would be lacking from the statistics, so to speak, of the myriads of variously reincarnating souls. This is a good explanatory strategy, but in a universe full of immortal souls, all stages of the cycle happen simultaneously. This is why we inhabit a world enlivened by countless living species.

While implying this diversity, Socrates is equally careful to impose a value hierarchy that descends from the philosophers to animals. Interestingly enough, the latter do not receive any further differentiation here, not even the simple one that we know from *Phaedo* 82a–b, let alone a more thorough one that we will encounter in the *Timaeus*. On the other hand, Socrates makes a remark about the condition of becoming human that

44 Since my interest is in the cosmic significance of transmigration, I will not discuss here the special cases of the three-time philosopher (who escapes the whole cycle after 3,000 years but whose souls can of course return to the cycle, depending on how successfully it ascends the next time) and the tyrant who seems to have very little chance to live the first allotted life "justly".

45 "Second to ninth" life because the first life of the whole cycle is allotted. There is no choice before the first embodied life and no choice before the last 1,000 years of the whole cycle, which the souls spend being either rewarded or punished for their immediately preceding lives. Then follows a new attempt to follow the gods and ascend to the plain of truth.

deserves closer attention: at 249b6–7, he says that no soul that has never seen the truth can incarnate in human form, and that this is because human beings must grasp the meaning of the speech (“what is said”) in terms of what is general (presumably in the light of divisions based on the eternally stable Forms). This statement prepares the *subsequent* explanation of the role of recollection but has no support in the *previous* passages. However, the new condition should be consistent with the earlier assertions that even a glimpse of the truth is enough to free the soul from incarnation (248c3–5), and that once the soul fails in this effort, its next incarnation is in a human body (248d1–2). The precise cause of this ultimate failure is unknown: it happens “by some accident” (τινι συντυχίᾳ) in the cosmic procession of souls (248c6–7).⁴⁶ Taken together, these claims imply that human beings are born out of a mixture of success and failure, where enough traces of the successful grasp of truth are contained to be recollected.

But, if so, where – or rather, *when* – do animals enter the picture? Clearly, they can *only* exist if a previously human soul endowed with rationality chooses to enter an animal body. In other words, animal existence does not result from a punishment imposed on the soul from the outside; it follows from a choice, no matter how questionable such a choice may appear to a philosopher. This consequence of the whole scheme as presented by Socrates is usually overlooked, and it may even seem unintentional. Be that as it may, this generation of other mortal species through the soul's own decision is certainly the most original part of the way transmigration is approached in the *Phaedrus*. As a result, the generation of animals is an integral part of the soul's “care” for the inanimate. Concerning humankind, the *Phaedrus* is more pessimistic than the *Phaedo* (in the long run, all souls seem to suffer “some accident”), but it makes even more clear that this situation is counterbalanced by the existence of a world where biodiversity can be reconciled with long-term stability.

4 The *Timaeus*

If the *Phaedrus* leaves unclear to what degree the animal souls retain the capacity for rational discourse and reasoning, the *Timaeus* perpetuates this mystery. The two dialogues differ on this point insofar as their overall

46 On these turns of luck, see Bluck 1958, 158. Cf. Dixsaut 2012, 37, on the human soul as the lowest kind of divine soul that, “by an unfortunate turn of luck” (248c6), has become forgetful and heavy.

schemes of transmigration differ. In the *Phaedrus*, previously animal souls can choose to become human souls again, but it is true that they will be able to choose rationally only after leaving the animal body. In the *Timaeus*, the souls do not choose their next incarnation, but we are told that only intellect is immortal and passes from one body to another, so that some vestige of rationality is apparently present throughout the variety of mortal lives, no matter how (literally) distorted it gets in animal bodies. If the soul can reincarnate “above” its previous incarnation, and its reincarnation is a matter of desert rather than choice, then there must be something to justify this reward. Simply put, the whole scheme presupposes that, for every kind of animal, there is an appropriate kind of life. In this way, the *Timaeus* extends to the animal kingdom the conception of justice as “doing one’s own”, which was introduced and explained in the *Republic*.⁴⁷ In this new and much broader context, where the focus is not on individuals but on the whole spectrum of animal species, this means living the life appropriate to a given species.

In his speech, Timaeus offers no details about the souls in animal bodies or about animal ethology. On the other hand, he explains the primary role of animal diversity in the cosmos, a role to which transmigration is subordinate. I will interpret this role as succinctly as possible, focusing mainly on three passages (39e–40a, 42b–d, 90e–92c) where transmigration is invoked in order to establish the hierarchy of mortal species.

The first thing to emphasize is that the hierarchy of species *within* the cosmos has no counterpart in the *model* of this cosmos. The chosen model, which is complete and unique, contains “all intelligible living things” (τὰ νοητὰ ζῶα πάντα, 30c7) as its parts; this is the *only* information about its content, besides the later specification that “all” means exactly four.⁴⁸ The model’s completeness clearly follows from the most general properties of “that which always is” (τὸ ὄν αἰεῖ, 27d6), and these properties are independent of the model’s content. That the model is graspable only by understanding, that it is unchanging and thus not subject to generation and corruption, is what makes it more suitable for re-creation in changing materials. This premise receives no properly argumentative justification, but Timaeus insists that the intelligible status of its model will guarantee the visible excellence or beauty of the created world (28a6–b2); in contrast, what will keep

47 I will return to this point below. For a different view, see Robinson 1997.

48 See Thein 2006 for a detailed discussion of the intelligible model and its four parts as blueprints for the animate fixed stars and the animal kingdom.

this world in existence for all time are not the properties of its model, but the will of its demiurge (41a8–b6).

According to lines 28a6–b2, the demiurge fashions the universe's "form and function" (ἰδέαν καὶ δύνανμιν, 28a8) with a view to its beauty or visible excellence.⁴⁹ The expression ἰδέα καὶ δύναμις receives no immediate clarification, but it seems to anticipate what the demiurge needs to achieve so as to guarantee that the universe's manifold unity will hold together and teem with life (cf. 46c7–b1 on god and the auxiliary causes that he uses in order to complete "the ἰδέα of what is most excellent"). As we know already, the kinds of life in our cosmos derive from the composition of the intelligible model, but what the demiurge and his divine helpers need to invent is the variety of material environments to accommodate the whole scale of life forms that must be present within the perfect universe.

The first of these environments are the bodies which, like the body of the whole universe, consist of various mixtures of the four elements created by the demiurge for this very purpose. It is therefore in virtue of their elemental compositions that animal bodies fit into their broader environment and, if Timaeus had paid more attention to it, animal ethology would no doubt proceed from this constitutive correlation. That much is implied by the use of this correlation in Timaeus' introduction of the four groups of living things that must come into being in this world if it is to resemble its model. This introduction then moves on to account for the nature and appearance of the fixed stars, the first group of living beings that are described as generated and yet divine, differing from other creatures not only by their environment and their material composition but also by their specific function. It is here that Timaeus establishes the relation between parts of the model and animal kinds most clearly, so that we need a full quotation again:

Prior to the coming to be of time, the universe had already been made to resemble in various respects the model in whose likeness the god was making it, but the resemblance still fell short in that it didn't yet contain all the living things that were to have come to be within it (τὰ πάντα ζῶα ἐντὸς αὐτοῦ γεγενημένα). This remaining task he went on to perform, casting the world into the nature of its model. And so he determined that the living thing he was making should possess the same kinds and numbers of living things as those which, according to the

49 I borrow the term "function" for δύναμις from Archer-Hind 1888 and read the sentence like he does: the ἰδέα καὶ δύναμις in question belong to the created universe, not to its eternal model.

discernment of intellect, are contained within the real living thing (τῷ ὃ ἔστιν ζῶον). Now there are four of these kinds: first, the heavenly race of gods (οὐράνιον θεῶν γένος); next, the kind that has wings and travels through the air (πτηνὸν καὶ ἀεροπόρον); third, the kind that lives in water (ἔνυδρον εἶδος); and fourth, the kind that has feet and lives on land (πεζὸν δὲ καὶ χερσαῖον). The form of gods he made mostly out of fire (τοῦ θείου τὴν πλείστην ιδέαν ἐκ πυρὸς ἀπηργάζετο), to be the brightest and fairest to the eye (λαμπρότατον ἰδεῖν τε κάλλιστον). He made them well-rounded, to resemble the universe, and placed them in the wisdom of the dominant circle, to follow the course of the universe. He spread them throughout the whole heaven to be a true adornment, intricately wrought over it all (κόσμον ἀληθινὸν αὐτῷ πεποικιλμένον εἶναι καθ' ὅλον). (39e3–40a7)

Clearly, the sequence of the four groups of living beings corresponds to the four elements ordered from the lightest to the heaviest. The celestial bodies are not fire but are *mostly* made of fire, and we can reasonably assume the analogous composition of the next three animal groups or species.⁵⁰ The material composition is also associated with a certain kind of motion: celestial gods perform two of the seven motions distinguished in the *Timaeus*, namely rotation in the same place (“by which the god would always think the same thoughts about the same things”, 40a8–b1) and a forward revolution. This makes them mobile, yet as unchanging as possible. Other animal groups will participate in the remaining five, less perfect motions, without any further hierarchy between them. There is therefore a clean break between the celestial and all other animals. And while all four groups of created beings are necessary for the world’s structural perfection, only the celestial creatures resemble the round universe, and they alone are exalted as contributing to the *idea* of a visibly beautiful whole.

All this means that the celestial creatures, placed outside the cycle of generation, are separated from the striving proper to the remaining animals with their need to feed (often on each other) and to reproduce. But it is precisely this irreconcilable difference that will be used by the demiurge to introduce not only an order but a true hierarchy among the remaining living species. Before delegating the creation of these species to his helpers, the

50 The three groups or species of mortal animals are listed in the order that mirrors their habitat (but not their intelligence) and leads from the lightest to the heaviest element: from air through water to land or earth. This progression reverses the one introduced in Herodotus II 123, the passage closest to Plato’s scheme here.

demiurge will create the last part of the universe that will enjoy true individual immortality, namely the intellect, which will find its best possible incarnation in the human head, where it will seek to calculate and thus reenact the celestial motions. The success or failure of this active imitation will then determine a given intellect's next incarnation on either the same or a lower level of the animal kingdom.

This is a rough summary of what Timaeus reveals piece by piece. Before we follow him in turning to the mortal species, one thing concerning the celestial creatures needs to be emphasized. Besides becoming a standard whose perfection will make it possible to measure the intellectual degradation of the first and subsequent generations of humans, celestial beings form a beautiful pattern whose value consists precisely in its observable and pleasing variety. The verb *poikillō* implies a polychromatic fabric, and if its Platonic connotations are mostly negative ones when human arts and crafts are concerned, it acquires a commendable sense when Timaeus talks about the supreme divine art as productive of fixed stars.⁵¹ In fact, both groups of celestial beings created by the demiurge are endowed with an aesthetic dimension since planets, which are created independently and are not images of one part of the model in the same sense as the fixed stars, are fashioned to complement the beauty of the statue-like universe: they form a cosmic embroidery, being “as bewilderingly numerous as astonishingly variegated” (πλήθει μὲν ἀμυγᾶνῳ χρωμένας, πεποικιλμένας δὲ θαυμαστῶς, 39d1–2). This description has an obvious aesthetic dimension: not only do the heavens possess their own visible beauty, but this beauty is achieved through variety. There would be a lot to say about this variety and the complementarity of planets and fixed stars, but our main question is to know whether and how this beautiful variety, which is proper to the first of the four groups of living things, translates in the lower world around us.⁵²

Not surprisingly, when we enter the realm where the immortal intellects move from one body to another, the diversity is not valued for its own sake, but insofar as the plurality of living species serves the goal of perfecting the whole to the detriment of some of its parts. There is no doubt that Timaeus presents the mortal species in descending order of value, regardless of the

51 On meanings and values of *poikilia* in Greek culture, see Grand-Clément 2015; on variegation in Plato, see Nightingale 2018 and some further remarks in the concluding section below.

52 I leave aside the constitution of time, in which both kinds of celestial beings play their role. For more on this topic and the uneasy articulation of time's structure with time's arrow, see Goldin 1998, Thein 2001, 204–237, Thein 2021, Araújo 2022, Bianchi 2022.

fact that each of the next three animal groups is equally important as the living image of its intelligible model. In the overall scheme of things, two different standards of perfection are therefore at work: one that relates the living species as parts of the cosmos to their extra-cosmic models; and another one that measures these parts against each other. It is this second standard that will help to organize transmigration: once the world is created, the individual mortal animals will be judged not according to their likeness to (let alone understanding of) their intelligible models, but by the standard that is provided by the perfect celestial motions. Contrary to the *Phaedrus*, the success or failure of contemplating the extra-cosmic Forms plays no role in any of the incarnations. What is decisive is the success in mastering the circles of one's own intellect, to which end one must rely primarily on observing and understanding, hence assimilating and re-enacting, the order visibly established in the heavens.

This state of affairs is first summarized, rather than really explained, at 42b–d. This is the moment when the demiurge completes the created intellects and needs to take care about their incarnation. I leave aside the previous lines on the construction of the intellects from the same mixture that was used for the constitution of the world soul, but is now only “of the second and third grade of purity” (41d7). This sudden impurity of the same mixture remains a mystery, although it may have played some role in the demiurge's decision to sow the intellects into various, but in each individual case appropriate, “instruments of time” (41e5). Already at this point, Timaeus mentions the gendered nature of the human species for the first time, describing males as “superior” (42a1–3). The final pages of the dialogue will explain that humankind is divided into two genders solely for the purpose of reproducing the *bodies* of both genders. This confirms that Timaeus' view of the female as inferior is not necessary for the scheme of transmigration. It is nevertheless true that, instead of simply splitting humankind into two different forms, Timaeus makes these forms unequal and includes them *as such* in his scheme of transmigration. It is only a successful *male* life that guarantees the return of the intellect in question to the celestial body where it was originally sown by the demiurge. In contrast, the other options are those that guarantee the world's biological diversity:

And if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character. But if he failed in this, he would be born a second time, now as a woman (σφαλεις δὲ τούτων εἰς γυναικὸς φύσιν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει μεταβαλοῖ).

And if even then he still could not refrain from wickedness, he would be changed once again, this time into some wild animal that resembled the wicked character he had acquired (κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς τοῦ τρόπου γενέσεως εἷς τινα τοιαύτην αἰεὶ μεταβαλοῖ θήρειον φύσιν). And he would have no rest from these toilsome transformations until he had dragged that massive accretion of fire-water-air-earth into conformity with the revolution of the Same and uniform within him, and so subdued that turbulent, irrational mass by means of reason. This would return him to his original condition of excellence. (42b3–d2)

As in the other dialogues, a particular bodily shape ultimately refers to the desires of the intellect and to its ability or inability to control the inclinations of the soul's lower parts. At the same time, only the *Timaeus* implies a correlation between this shape and the environment in which one of the four elements prevails. This correlation is not explained in detail, and it is true that this issue is present in other ancient authors before and after Plato (Empedocles and Aristotle come readily to mind), but the fact that the four elements serve to differentiate among the four created groups of living beings has its importance.⁵³ This importance is only reinforced by the non-coincidence between the ordering of the elements from the lightest to the heaviest and the ordering of animal species according to their intellectual excellence. Human beings are environmentally connected to the earth which is the heaviest element, and yet they will be treated as superior to birds as inhabitants of the air, not to mention aquatic species.⁵⁴

A closer look at the dialogue's final pages confirms this double ordering. At 90e–92c, *Timaeus* offers another explanation of how different groups of mortal animals came to be, this time taking into account things that proceed from necessity, and not only things crafted by the divine intellect of the demiurge (see 47e–48a). As a result, it is this second account that is supposed to shed light on the mixed origin of the lower animals as necessary parts of this universe.⁵⁵ This means that *Timaeus* pays attention not only to

53 On the history of this correlations and other related issues, see Zatta 2019, with further references.

54 Cf. Osborne 2007, 55 on humans and their elemental environment: *Timaeus* “classifies the animals according to their habitat, not according to their possession of different faculties of soul, and there is no special class for human beings. Humankind must belong in the general class of animals that have feet and live on land.” Again, individual moral excellence and the world's completeness have mutually irreducible value.

55 For this framework of the divergences between 39e–40a and 90e–92c, see Rashed 2012.

what determines the intellect's next incarnation but also to the corporeal instruments of generation, starting with the sexual dimorphism expressed by the male or female organs.

I cannot (and need not) deal here with the whole issue of reproduction.⁵⁶ Suffice it to say that female animals and sexuality are clearly not prescribed in the intelligible model but invented as tools necessary to produce animal bodies of a given species. This is most likely why sexual generation introduces new modalities of incarnate life, modalities specific to the sexual organs first and then to the embryos. Timaeus describes both the former and the latter as ζῶα or inherently animate, biological structures, and his account of their nature is textually quite entangled. However, it is clear that female bodies require a greater degree of ingenuity on the part of the creating gods, who cannot deploy the same strategy as in their construction of the male sex organ, where they make use of the channel that goes through the lungs over the kidneys to the bladder and serves to expel the fluids. More importantly, however, the anatomical and physiological detail of the text confirms that both male and female organs behave under the same imperatives of the unruly desires that are harnessed to the end of procreation (91a1–d5). There are, therefore, no biological reasons for Timaeus' misogyny.⁵⁷ On the biological level, the new physiology, which consists of the simpler male and the more complex female sexual organs, is simply a way of furnishing the transmigrating intellects with their mutable carnal support. It should be noted that the detailed description first concerns the birth of the two human sexes, but Timaeus then confirms that the same division occurs in other species (91d5–6).

This confirmation is important insofar as it implies that there are indeed good and bad ways of living one's own life at every level of the animal realm. Sexuality therefore offers a second option for the next embodied life: at least in the case of humans, an unsuccessful life as a male can be followed either by a life as a female of the *same* species or by a life as a (presumably male) member of *another* species. A part of this scheme was implied already at 42b3–d2, but Timaeus is now more explicit, and he provides some detail about other species and their cosmically necessary, yet epistemically and morally failed disposition. This last long quotation will allow

56 For more on different facets of this important issue, see, e.g., Sandford 2010, 128–156, Blair 2012, 132–151, Brill 2015, Wilberding 2015, Gordon 2024, Thein forthcoming.

57 On this gap between the biology of the *Timaeus* and its sexist morality, see Thein forthcoming. For more detail on the physiology of sexual generation in the *Timaeus*, see also Rankin 1963, Krell 1975, Turbayne 1976, and, especially, Wilberding 2015.

us to sum up the lesson of the *Timaeus* and then move on to a more general conclusion:

That is how women and females in general came to be. As for birds, as a kind they are the products of a transformation (τὸ δὲ τῶν ὀρνέων φύλον μετερρυθμίζετο). They grow feathers instead of hair. They descended from innocent but stupid men (ἀνδρῶν) who studied the heavenly bodies but in their naiveté believed that the most reliable proofs concerning them could be based upon visual observation. Land animals in the wild, moreover, came from those who had no tincture of philosophy and who made no study of the universe whatsoever, because they no longer made use of the revolutions in their heads but instead followed the lead of the parts of the soul that reside in the chest (ἀλλὰ τοῖς περὶ τὰ στήθη τῆς ψυχῆς ἡγεμόσιν ἔπεσθαι μέρεσιν). As a consequence of these ways of theirs they carried their forelimbs and their heads dragging towards the ground, like towards like. The tops of their heads became elongated and took all sorts of shapes, depending on the particular way the revolutions were squeezed together from lack of use. This is the reason animals of this kind have four or more feet. The god placed a greater number of supports under the more mindless beings, so that they might be drawn more closely to the ground. As for the most mindless of these animals, the ones whose entire bodies stretch out completely along the ground, the gods made them without feet, crawling along the ground, there being no need of feet anymore. The fourth kind of animal, the kind that lives in water, came from those who were without question the most stupid and ignorant of all. The gods who brought about their transformation concluded that these no longer deserved to breathe pure air, because their souls were tainted with errors of every sort (ὥς τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὸ πλημμελείας πάσης ἀκαθάρτως ἔχόντων). Instead of letting them breathe rare and pure air, they shoved them into water to breathe its murky depths. This is the origin of fish, of all shellfish, and of every water-inhabiting animal. Their just reward for their extreme stupidity is their extreme dwelling place (δίκην ἀμαθίας ἐσχάτης ἐσχάτας οἰκήσεις εἰληχότων). In all these ways, both then and now, the animals keep changing into one another, as they transform by losing or gaining intelligence or folly (καὶ κατὰ ταῦτα δὴ πάντα τότε καὶ νῦν διαμείβεται τὰ ζῶα εἰς ἄλληλα, νοῦ καὶ ἀνοίας ἀποβολῇ καὶ κτήσει μεταβαλλόμενα). (91d5–92c3)

In all the specific cases he mentions, Timaeus seems to talk only about the transformations that present us with further deviations from human males (see ἐκ τῶν ἀνδρῶν at 91d7, which is then assumed throughout the sequence). This is because the decline (rather than the ascent) of the species continues to refer to its starting point in the first deviation of the male intellect from its model that is visible in the celestial revolutions. As Timaeus puts it, these motions, which are the thoughts of the universe, “have an affinity to the divine part within us” and it is them that “each of us should follow” (90c7–d1). The inability to do so properly leads to the generation of birds, and then of other species with increasingly distorted circles of the intellect within them. This theoretical standard is why the quoted passage, unlike the previous explanation of the origin of females, leaves aside the moral failure. As a result, we obtain two complementary models: a moral model of why an intellect passes to the female of the species, and a theoretical model of the overall decline of the species.⁵⁸

The complementarity of these two models leaves a number of questions unanswered, especially because the last quoted sentence speaks about “losing or gaining intelligence or folly”. For instance, is there a way for an intellect present in a female blackbird to reincarnate in a human male? In principle, there should be, since the negative answer would imply the progressive, although probably long-term, depletion of the human reservoir.⁵⁹ Looking in the opposite direction, and to bypass these problems, it was suggested that Timaeus wants to imply that each animal life is always followed by (at least) one human life in the male shape, which would mean that *all* animals and also human females are directly reincarnated human males.⁶⁰ We could naturally ask further questions, but it is more important to realize

58 The two models are not clean-cut, let alone mutually exclusive; see the hint at the prevalence of *thumos* as the rationale behind the birth of the land animals. The error here is both intellectual and moral. In any case, the importance of the theoretical failure of some of the first men is reinforced by Timaeus’ silence about the intellects passing through other animal species rather than exclusively between humans and animals.

59 Perhaps the elevation of the intellects incarnated in animals happens uniquely on conventionally rather than Platonically moral grounds: for instance, the intellect would be compensated for a dog’s good canine behavior.

60 Given what is said rather than implied in the text, I find more plausible the possibility of a progressive descent or ascent of the same intellect through a series of different incarnations (granted that each sort of life can be lived well or badly). For a similar view and references to the other reading, see Robinson 1997; a detailed discussion in Carpenter 2008, 47–57, implies the same position, as does Carone 1998, 122–123.

that Timaeus' concluding summary ("in all these ways, both then and now, the animals keep changing into one another") is sufficiently flexible to extend beyond the previous series of examples. At the same time, however, there is no getting around the fact that Timaeus describes the diversity of the biosphere around us as a distortion of the more perfect beauty of the heavens.

This last point gives new weight to the difference between perfect celestial beauty and the beauty of the universe as a whole. Both exhibit a sensually apprehended variety, a *poikilia*, but only the mortal and mutable parts of the universe sustain this variety through constant change. Timaeus describes transmigration as an integral part of this process, more exactly as one of the cosmic tools that lend becoming its stable general structure. In this respect, his account has a lot in common with the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*. No less important, however, is one major difference: transmigration in the sense of the motion of the souls through this universe helps to maintain the diversity of species around us that makes the world resemble its intelligible model, but individual souls are never described as being in charge of the universal becoming. This role is clearly assigned to the world soul, which is absent from the previously mentioned dialogues. The resulting understanding of the complex ecosystem around us is thus both narrower and broader than in the other dialogues: narrower because it is divorced from the structured world's survival; broader because the structure (though not the survival) of that ecosystem is derived from an intelligible blueprint.

A full analysis of the ontology implied in this new framework of transmigration is far beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that this framework follows from Timaeus' description of the division of divine creation that entails the separation between one immortal material species made by the demiurge and three mortal species whose existence is made possible by the work of the demiurge's helpers or lesser gods. The original human intellect, which will pass through the endless series of incarnations, is the demiurge's last creation, and the delegation of all further work to other gods is the means of ensuring the variable unity of the mortal and immortal parts of the universe. This means that the definition of "immortal" and "mortal" living beings depends, first and foremost, on their *cause*, in other words, on the kind of divinity at work in their fabrication. From this perspective, the material differences between the species and their habitats

are secondary to Timaeus' emphasis on divine agency, which is always difficult to integrate into a philosophical system.⁶¹

Concerning the proper role of transmigration, it is now clear that, in the *Timaeus*, it does not sustain the whole cosmos, which would depend on the self-motion of individual souls. For this very reason, however, transmigration is more directly connected to the task of maintaining the complex variety of the "lower" part of the universe, a variety newly justified on the level of the intelligible model of living species. Seen in this light, Timaeus' use of transmigration reaches beyond a partial reworking of older doctrines (or simply stories) of metempsychosis. Most importantly, it does not rely on a universal kinship of all nature, but rather reflects the diversity of various levels of reality. The connectedness of living beings is expressed in stronger terms in other dialogues (see the kinship of "all nature" at *Meno* 81d1), where individual reincarnating souls appear as agents whose cosmic role can be described as a care for what would otherwise be an inanimate heap of stuff. Explaining why the souls in the *Timaeus* descend at all, Proclus thus makes a logical move in borrowing precisely this idiom. The soul descends

because it wants to imitate the providential care of the gods (ὅτι βούλεται μιμεῖσθαι τὸ προνοητικὸν τῶν θεῶν), and it enters into generation (εἰς τὴν γένεσιν) on this account, abandoning contemplation. For, given that divine perfection is of two kinds, the one intellective, and the other providential, the former involving rest and the latter motion, their static, intellective, and undeviating nature is reflected through the contemplation, while their providential and motive [power is reflected] in its generation working life (διὰ τῆς γενεσιουργοῦ ζωῆς).

In Tim. Diehl 3.324.6–12, trans. Tarrant 2017

This brief synthesis departs strikingly from the letter of the *Timaeus*, but it captures Plato's differently expressed view that supervision or care is needed if the whole cosmos is to abound with mortal life. In its own way, transmigration is then what should make the souls "care" even without being conscious of their role: it uses both intelligence and stupidity in view of the maintenance of the world around us (the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*) or for the more precise goal of guaranteeing the continuous existence of the three groups of mortal animal kinds (the *Timaeus*).

61 To a degree, the rich history of the exegesis of the *Timaeus* consists of a series of attempts at such a reduction. For a recent non-reductive interpretation that scrutinizes the role of divinity in the *Timaeus*, see Broadie 2012.

This variable scheme, which includes different eschatological descriptions of what the universe is like beyond our sensible experience, always contains one crucial element: the intellect, as the certifiably immortal part of the soul, is never detached from the structure of the cosmos, but changes its intra-cosmic habitats. In every niche of the animal world, the intellects are thus present as individual agents with their own and unique causal stories. These stories can make us marvel at the cunning environmental tuning that makes particular places habitable for particular animal species, or they can produce a certain malaise that follows from the obvious implication that a moral or epistemic failure is firmly inscribed into the laws of fate. My answer to this worry is that Plato's decision to establish a connection between the post-mortem rewards and punishments on the one hand and a *neatly structured* biodiversity on the other hand means that he is willing to pay the price of this threatening moral darkness. Here we should bear in mind that the older views of reincarnation were related to a different understanding of animal life, with no notion of species as proper or original parts of the world's inalterable structure.

That Plato offers no firm definition of "species" (a task that has yet to be fulfilled) does not detract from the impact that the positing of exactly four "intelligible living beings" has on the thorough reframing of the produced universe as "nature". The correlation between different animal groups and "their" elements is not new, but the *Timaeus* makes this correlation part of a careful construction carried out by the demiurge, who reaches beyond the four elements' sensible qualities and reinforces the latter by the geometrical construction that furnishes the elements with their new basis. At 55d–57d, we learn not only about the relations between the elements that result from this technical reinforcement, but also about their capacity to sustain the constant change on the sensible level. In this new framework, transmigration retains its moral dimension, but it also becomes the means of supplying the constantly generated bodies with the only ingredient that is not produced by elemental mixtures: the immortal part of the soul or the intellect. Still, even the intellect is an integral part of the multi-layered cosmic exchange that keeps instantiating the intelligible living being in the world's body.

This exchange warrants one final comment before we conclude this chapter: a comment on the relatively little-discussed text of *Timaeus* 33c4–8. These lines come after the explanation of why the body of the universe did not need to be equipped with either the sense organs or an organ for breathing. To this, they add why it did "not need any organ by which to take in food or, again, expel it when it had been digested. For since there

wasn't anything else, there would be nothing to leave it or come to it from anywhere. It supplied its own waste for its nourishment (αὐτὸ γὰρ ἑαυτῷ τροφήν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φθείσιν παρέχον)" (33c4–8). Of course, this last sentence comes as a surprise. Timaeus adds that the demiurge did all this in order to make the created world self-sufficient (αὐτάρκες, 33d2), but this explanation only makes the quoted sentence stand out: the world neither perceives nor breathes, yet it *does* something that is at least analogous to digestion. The processes in question clearly amount to a continuous recycling of the world's materials, which are organized into masses of land, water, or air, and, most importantly, into individual animate bodies. In this respect, the created world literally recycles the bodies it contains below the level of the stars, where everything can be said to live in the world's entrails. Alfred Taylor provides his own striking image to explain the unexpected line in his commentary on the *Timaeus*: "The decay of some parts of it provides the τροφή which supports others, so that it lives, so to say, like a hibernating animal, by the consumption of its own fat."⁶²

The weakness of this evocative comparison is that the ensouled world is constantly awake, though not necessarily aware of the processes that Taylor wishes to illustrate. Among these processes, transmigration itself presupposes the constant generation of individual animals whose physiology (and thus waste) fuels the cosmic ecosystem. Seen in this light, the passage of intellects across the borders between animal species is not only an instrument of reward or punishment on the individual level, but also a means of controlling the world's pre-established balance: a way of exercising divine "care" for the whole in view of its extra-cosmic blueprint. In this respect, the *Timaeus* takes a different direction than the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus*, where the maintenance of the universe depends on individual souls alone and access to the Forms appears as a matter of individual knowledge and morality. In the *Timaeus*, the perspective of a created whole requires a producer with an overview of the cosmos and its structure that no individual reincarnating soul could achieve. Compared to what we learn about transmigration in the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* x, this perspective is darker in that it omits to even mention the possible choice of the next incarnation, which

62 Taylor 1928, 102–103. Cf. more recently Holmes 2019, 262: "Plato's world animal in the *Timaeus*, which eats its own waste in a cycle of perfectly balanced input and output, performs the difficulty of an organism that must make a life, understood as the most minimal state of self-differentiation in time, by cannibalizing itself under cover of waste production (33c8–d3)."

reinforces the broader cosmological role of transmigration without denying its connection to individual ethics.

In this respect, the *Timaeus* comes closer to *Laws* x that introduces transmigration by evoking the constant change of all things that contain soul, a change that proceeds “according to the ordinance and law of destiny” under the direct supervision of gods who send souls to different places of the cosmos that reflect the souls’ vicious or virtuous state (904e5–905a1). The *Laws*, however, offer nothing on the inter-species transmigration and instead elaborate a moralized cosmology tailor-made for anti-atheistic education.⁶³ Subjugating nature to divine art that arranges the whole universe, including the changing places of particular souls, this cosmology bears in mind its use in human politics, to which the issue of transmigration is of little interest. *Timaeus*’ speech, however, stays focused on the structure of the well-crafted “natural” world, and in this context it confirms that Plato extends transmigration through all animal species, and that it is indeed the intellect that passes between animal bodies. With this result in mind, we can finally reassess the aspects of transmigration that are irreducible to the issue of post-mortem rewards or punishments.

5 The Transmigration’s Purpose Summarized

The first lesson of the above-analyzed texts is that, on a closer look, there is no intrinsic ethical reason for transmigration. Of course, reincarnation and ethics are repeatedly connected, but to reward or punish a soul for previous human actions, the soul’s afterlife would be sufficient, and this goal could be achieved regardless of whether the surviving soul reincarnates or not. In other words, although the specific reincarnation has an ethical dimension and is used as a form of reward or punishment, this ethical dimension is never mentioned as a unique *rationale* for the whole scheme of reincarnations. After all, the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* (and of course the *Meno*) even imply a reason of a different and essentially epistemic order: transmigration brings to the human realm some recoverable memories of those epistemic objects that cannot be known on the basis of human sense experience alone. However, neither the *Republic* nor the *Timaeus* rely on this kind of

63 See p. 108, note 4 above. For more on god or gods and cosmic justice in the *Laws*, see, e.g., Carone 2005b, 180–184.

justification and avoid even mentioning recollection as an epistemic tool.⁶⁴ The *Republic*, as we have seen, is also silent on the role of the soul in maintaining ordered natural motions – a role that is emphasized differently in both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* – but it provides a glimpse into the workings of the lower part of the universe with its deterministic framework that nevertheless allows for individual choices of the next life. In the relevant dialogues, the *Timaeus* included, the soul's mostly unwitting contribution is essential to keep the world in balance. Ultimately, no soul can choose or receive a life that would not benefit this balance.

All in all, the lower parts of the world are so constituted that the souls of mortal creatures take on the kind of care that is beyond – or rather below – the activity exercised by the world soul in the *Timaeus* or by the gods in other dialogues. It is certainly true that Plato does not offer a single rationale for transmigration, but, throughout the various dialogues, its cosmic role remains a constant feature of vast panoramas that show us countless souls crisscrossing the universe. In their great numbers, all these souls remain individuals, and this is why Plato's eschatology contains both the ethical dimension inherent to individual choices and their consequences, and the cosmic dimension, which zooms out from individual fate to the well-structured universe. The resulting *poikilia* differs from the Presocratic links between cosmology and eschatology precisely because it is based on Plato's conception of the soul as a truly individual agent and patient.⁶⁵ This conception of the soul as the true cause of physical events is at the heart of Plato's accounts of transmigration, even if the *sense* of the latter remains irreducible to a system of particular rewards and punishments.

It remains subject to debate is to what extent Plato succeeds in integrating transmigration with the moral issue of reward and punishment,⁶⁶ but both themes share the background of the soul as an animating cause that preserves its identity through numerous changes and across time. In this

64 In the *Timaeus*, the incarnated intellect restores its proper structure, distorted at birth, by means of observing and calculating the celestial revolutions, not by recollecting the results of previous such calculations.

65 On cosmology and eschatology in the Presocratics, see Betegh 2006, with further references. On psychology and cosmology in Heraclitus, see Betegh 2013. On Empedocles, see Trépanier 2017, including a comparison between Empedocles' eschatology and the *Phaedo*.

66 See the doubts voiced in Annas 1982, 127, concerning the *Phaedo*: "The final morally rectifying judgement is still there, together with vivid pictures of the afterlife; and they are unreconciled with the idea that the only appropriate punishment for bad souls is rebirth into another body."

regard, the importance of the soul for Platonic cosmology cannot be overstated. Not because of what the *human* soul can achieve in the epistemic context, but because of the sheer animating power of every soul, which plays a fundamental organizing role in the constantly recycling material universe. If, in the Presocratics, the soul detaches itself from the material cosmic background as part of the natural processes of which it is a part, Plato's soul is responsible for maintaining the very framework of natural becoming. The soul's (or, in the *Timaeus*, the intellect's) difference from elemental compounds does not preclude its causal influence on the latter but guarantees the soul's independence, which makes it a distinct moving cause of those natural motions that are exercised by visible and tangible bodies with a temporary identity of their own. In the long run, this causal influence is mediated through an unlimited series of bodies, and its object is not only this or that particular body but the broad nexus where the influence of all souls comes together in a framework that no reincarnating soul could establish on its own.

In this context, the talk about Platonic ecology is perhaps not entirely anachronistic, even if its original correlation between – and mutual sustenance of – species and habitats lacks anything close to the modern evolutionary perspective. As an integral part of Platonic cosmology, transmigration addresses the diversity of animal life-forms from a standpoint that is more cosmocentric than anthropocentric, regardless of its compliance with the ethically – and thus intellectually – determined hierarchy of species. Departing from the universal material exchange of the Presocratics, Plato introduces in his universe a different kind of transaction that uses death to rearrange the spectrum of *particular* lives without destabilizing the general ordering of living *species*. The dialogues do not offer a definition of what an animal “species” amounts to, although the treatment, in *Meno* 72c, of many different bees as members of a unique group with shared properties seems to take the first step in this direction. In any case, Plato clearly assumes that distinct animal groups have their own permanent place in the order of the universe. What connects these groups across different habitats, and also distinguishes them from plants is the presence of the immortal soul or the immortal part of the soul: in other words, the presence of the separable intellect in all animal species.

This last point has been repeatedly resisted, but the dialogues are clear: transmigration involves either the whole soul, including the intellect, or only the intellect and not the two lower parts of the soul. What is debatable are the details of tripartition, or the latter's status as a methodological image, but not the survival of the soul's intellectual core (after all, talk

about afterlife rewards and punishments would make no sense if they applied to parts of the soul that could not understand them). As a result, no animal can really lack intellect, even if Plato describes the animals as unreasonable in the sense of not properly *using* the intellect present in their bodies. In this respect, it is true that “there are no essential differences between humans and animals insofar as both of them have the possibility of exercising reason.”⁶⁷ In reincarnation, there would be a kind of downward causation whereby the state of the intellect bears down on the arrangement of the lower parts or functions of the souls in agreement with the particular body, its composition, its nourishment, and its mode of reproduction.⁶⁸ If Plato believes, as he clearly does, that there is no stability in nature without a prearranged oversight, the constant redistribution of the intellects across the whole gamut of animal life guarantees the stability of species because the animal bodies *express* the relatively durable states of the thinking part of the soul. Plato’s different accounts of transmigration thus bring together two different notions of the soul, “the soul as reason or the rational self and the soul as the life principle.”⁶⁹ Regardless, it is the variously distorted intellect that is exchanged as a common currency in the countless incarnations that contribute to the constant overall balance of life in the universe.

Plato thus distances himself from Presocratic views on the relation between individual souls and the cosmos, all the while integrating some earlier ideas into his new style of describing the soul as both a person and a cosmic actor. As a result, if Plato appropriates but modifies what was called the “journey model”, one that preserves the soul’s identity across larger time spans, he also transforms the “portion model”, in which the soul is a portion

67 Carone 1998, 123. And cf. Osborne 2007, 56, on the *Timaeus*: “There is, then, for Timaeus, no fundamental difference between men and women, or between men and animals. Women and animals are simply those of us who fail to live up to our full potential; we are nature’s under-achievers, though the reason seems to be that we find ourselves in bodies that make it extremely hard to achieve better.” This last sentence may obscure the fact that Timaeus (whose sexism is beyond doubt) sees the bodies as part of the reward or punishment for previous either moral or intellectual achievements or failures.

68 Cf. Robinson 1997, 47: “the intellect migrates from animal to animal while establishing a close relation to a given animal’s mortal parts of its soul.”

69 This formulation comes from Inwood 2009, 37, who continues: “The soul as life principle persists from the child to the adult and from the human life to the animal life. The soul as reason emerges only at certain stages of our earthly and metempsychotic careers”.

of certain cosmic stuff with specific functions.⁷⁰ We know already that Plato's souls are never described as fully incorporeal, but they are emphatically distinguished from the visible and tangible elemental mixtures that we call "bodies". Preserving a direct causal connection between souls and bodies is imperative; but it is no less important to liberate the soul from the processes of generation and destruction that it is supposed to take care of. This "care", to use the language of the *Phaedrus*, characterizes the regions inhabited by mortal animals, whereas the celestial realm and its inhabitants are newly removed from generation and destruction so as to "make up an intricate and variegated dance."⁷¹ This understanding of the heavens as both an aesthetic spectacle and an ethical paradigm only reinforces the role of transmigrating souls as keepers of the stable equilibrium in the lower region around us. The resulting scheme relies on a kind of feedback: the actions of countless souls are a prerequisite for the variety of species, which then, in virtue of many different kinds of life, maintain the permanence of this diversity.

Recognition of this feedback is one of the reasons why selected passages from Plato have been compared to the modern preoccupation with stability in diverse ecosystems, and also why some authors see transmigration as a topic that needs to be taken seriously in precisely this context.⁷² A logical step is then to wonder whether human souls, in virtue of their capacity for rational thinking and action, should become guardians in an extended sense that would include entire habitats or species-rich ecosystems. However, Plato never specifies this role, which would presumably suit the philosophers whom *Republic* VI, 486a, invites to focus not only on the Forms but on the whole universe existing in infinite time.⁷³ This focus is thus more plausibly

70 I borrow the useful distinction between these two models from Betegh 2006, who also reads the *Timaeus* as the integration of both models. On Heraclitus, the cosmic soul and the human souls, see also Betegh 2009.

71 Nightingale 2018, 347.

72 On Plato and ecology, see the very different perspectives in, e.g., Adams 1997, Goldin 1997, Mahoney 1997a, Mahoney 1997b, Plumwood 1997, Carone 1998, Lane 2012. Cf. also various passages in Usher 2020. On the question of Plato, anthropocentrism and environmental ethics, see, e.g., Torres 2021.

73 On this role, cf. Pietarinen 2004, 98: "According to Plato, 'it is everywhere the responsibility of the animate to look after all that lacks a soul' (*Phaedrus* 246b). This, I think, should be read primarily as a moral norm. We humans have received a self-determining soul and must therefore look after things endowed with less rationality. This means, as Plato frequently emphasizes, that we are responsible for our own bodies, for their health and well-being, but also for those with less rationality. We are the rulers of animals and plants, and Plato compares good rulers with shepherds caring for their herd: good shepherds and cowherds seek the good of their sheep and cattle, not their

connected to the soul's care for itself, a care that extends to the series of its individual bodies. This care may well be for "the whole time", and it is undeniable that Plato's various images of transmigration also have their important *temporal* aspect. To weave these pictures into the fabric of myths (including the creation story of the *Timaeus*) is Plato's answer to the problem of conveying both the *structure* of the present universe and the *timescale* that is incommensurable with the duration of human life or with the life of just a few human generations. In other words, Plato clearly tries to reconcile the images of the life of the soul with the recognition of the infinity of time, which is beyond the power of our imagination. Simultaneously, however, Plato's myths make sense precisely against the background of the here and now.⁷⁴ In the context of the infinite time, it is our present human life that is treated as a special and decisive segment of the soul's life: a kind of crossroad where, like Heracles, each soul chooses between virtue and vice. In this way too, the images of transmigration belong to the ethics, including its inherent dramatization of time – ethics, after all, is a weapon against the time's indifference.

The scheme of transmigration discussed in this chapter is nevertheless meant to work regardless of the moral and epistemic imperfection of individual souls: an imperfection that the cosmological framework uses to its advantage. This strategy does not diminish the agency of individual souls, but it confirms that this agency does not simply derive from self-aware intentionality. The soul's capacity to act on its own does not imply the transparency of its motivation, all the more so because no human soul is capable of grasping itself without the help of images that inevitably externalize its agency. As a result, once we turn from the cosmic perspective back to the individual soul, we are again confronted with the impossibility of absolute purity that Chapter 2 discussed in relation to the *Phaedo*. To come full circle and complete our inquiry, we need to address this impossibility precisely with a view to the images of the soul. These images do not offer a solution to the riddle of agency, but they do illustrate the difficulty of separating the soul's agency from the agency that we usually ascribe to the human person.

master's or their own good (*Republic* 343b). No matter how we understand the task of looking after the good of nature and not just our own good, it is obvious that we should take care of the natural diversity. We have seen that for Plato, at least according to *Timaeus*, the best thing in the sensible realm is the great diversity of living beings, and hence the worst thing to do would be to impoverish the diversity by reducing the frequency and life space of the members of the other species."

74 A similar point is made by Nightingale 2002, 230, who speaks about the "eschatology of the present".

Imagining the Soul in *Republic* IX and X: Reframing the Agency

1 The Need for Images

Previous chapters insisted that, for all its epistemic and ethical importance, the perspective of the soul's separability (or actual separation) from the body is not sufficient for us to grasp what the soul is and, especially, what it does. If the soul has some agency of its own, it cannot be defined by distinguishing the soul from our visible and tangible body. Why, then, is Plato so reluctant to address this issue more directly and explicitly than he does? This final chapter will suggest that one of the reasons is the limitations of our language, including the fact that once we try to focus on the soul's actions, we are forced to talk about the soul in a way that makes it almost indistinguishable from a human person.

Perhaps a concrete example is the best way to grasp this difficulty. In the *First Alcibiades*, Plato invites us to “care for the soul” and explains the importance of this care.¹ But as we follow his argument, it becomes clear that it is the soul, when unhindered, that cares for us: it is our innermost self. Through a long series of questions, Socrates gets closer and closer to this self, peeling away the layers of body and activities that are common to body and soul. Using the craft analogy, he transforms our body and its functions – what the body can do – into instruments at the soul's disposal. Separating the soul from our corporeal parts, Socrates' analysis establishes the soul as a core concept, and he will even identify it, for a moment, with what it is to be human: humans are “nothing other than their soul”, suggests Socrates at 130c3 before correcting himself by stating that the soul is the “superior” (κυριώτερον) part of ourselves (130d6–7). This claim, however, is only the beginning of his effort to conceptually purify the soul in order to obtain “the clearest knowledge” (γνοίμεν αὐτὸ ἐναργέστατα) of it (132c7). It will soon turn out that the language of *enargeia* and *saphêneia* is symptomatic: it reveals the difficulty of grasping the soul clearly and vividly without borrowing the

1 I consider the *First Alcibiades* a work of Plato, following, e.g., Denyer 2001, 5–11, and Lachance 2012, 112–113, 130–132. On its importance for ancient readers versus modern doubts about its authenticity, see Renaud and Tarrant 2015.

images of the discarded body and its activities. Socrates tackles this problem very directly and decides to model the knowledge of “our soul” on the activity of sight (ὄψις), so that “knowing yourself” becomes “seeing yourself”: just as the physical eye sees itself in a mirror, a soul would “see” itself in a soul – more precisely, in another soul that would be its mirror. But since this leaves us without any clear discursive or imaginative solution (not knowing what a soul looks like, we also ignore what its mirror image looks like), this second soul is immediately replaced by the identification of the best part of the soul with what is divine. In this way, the soul’s gaze is again redirected beyond the soul itself. Not back to the world of bodies, but further away from it, toward the divine, which the soul “resembles” (ἔοικεν) (132d5–133c7).²

This is a rough summary of a much subtler argument,³ but the important point consists in this argument’s crowning and unavoidable recourse to likeness. More precisely, starting from the likeness between the soul’s handling of the body and human crafts, Socrates will arrive at the soul’s other likeness, one to the divine. The escape from the environment of visible and tangible bodies is not, therefore, an escape from imagining the soul to be and act *like* this or that other entity. In his argument, Socrates bypasses the hypothetical situation in which a soul would “look” directly into itself and itself alone, but this situation, precisely because it has no imaginable content, would not supply the argument’s conclusion. The soul’s introspective self-mirroring (which both is and cannot be modeled on visual perception) is a literally *blind* alley, and what lies beyond is either the divine (characterized rather loosely through knowing and understanding) or a return to the images of the soul that originate in the world of bodies. Even Socrates cannot resist such an image that he sketches at the end of the dialogue: in

2 Like most interpreters, I read $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omega$ in 133c4 (Burnet prints $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omega$). On the paradigm of sight in this passage, see Brunschwig 1973 and Soulez-Luccioni 1974. My summary omits out (and thus does not depend on) the spurious lines 133c8–17, which are often regarded as a gloss added by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio evangelica* XI, 27, 5, and repeated in Stobaeus’ *Anthology* III, 21, 24, and in the later manuscripts. As usual, the question of authenticity cannot be decided with scientific precision, but it is worth noting that there is no trace of these lines in an earlier anonymous commentary on the *Alcibiades*. For more details on this complex history, see Lassere 1991 and Pradeau 2000, 221–227, with further references. On these lines and their context in the dialogue, see also Tarrant 2015.

3 I tried to capture some of its complexity in Thein 2011–2012. Brunschwig 1996 is a very fine analysis of this text. Cf. also Werner 2013 and Ferguson 2019. On the shift from the eye-soul to the divine, see Johnson 1999. For a more general discussion of “images of oneself” in Plato, see Moore 2017.

Alcibiades 135e2, his love can be imagined as “hatching a winged love” (ἐν-νεοττεύσας ἔρωτα ὑπόπτερον). The proximity of this image to the winged soul of the *Phaedrus* is unmistakable.

The difficulty of establishing a universally valid account that would present the soul as our true self and explain the soul’s activities on this basis is thus closely connected to the way in which Plato, in various dialogues, recurs to discursive but strongly visual images of the soul as a composite creature. To a greater or a lesser extent, this seems to happen wherever the soul’s agency cannot be reduced to the purified activity of thought that can be accounted for, in the epistemological context, in terms of its object. In fact, even in this context, Plato does not proceed to identify the intellectual act of thought with its object, and thus avoids describing the thought as pure activity: unlike in Aristotle, even the thinking of immaterial objects involves some motion, the blueprint of which is, ultimately, the local motion.⁴ The intimate connection between soul and motion is, of course, highlighted through the image of the winged tripartite soul described by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. Having analyzed some facets of this image in Chapter 3.3, I will now turn to another tripartite εἰκών, one that Socrates presents in *Republic* IX. This choice is partly dictated by the complementarity of the two images. In the *Phaedrus*, the discussion begins with *erōs* and the erotic soul is projected into the cosmos, whereas in the *Republic*, the soul is embedded, from the beginning, into the very fabric of the city. As a result, the tripartite soul of the *Republic* is the incarnated soul and its images emphasize – and try to hold together – very different aspects of its agency, or even multiple agencies. In this respect, we will also revisit the question of how the tripartition, itself a simplified model or image, attempts to account for the real complexity of the soul’s motivations and actions.

It is probably to focus our attention on this invisible complexity that Plato’s images of the soul are often not simply borrowed from the world of sensible bodies, but are fashioned in a way that appropriates some fearsome mythical creatures, often composite themselves. These borrowings seem to be connected to the traditional theme of *human* complexity, which extends

4 This issue underlies Aristotle’s criticism of Plato in *De anima* I 3, 406b26–407b11. In this context, it is worth noting that the image of the soul in the *Phaedrus* allows for a qualified immobility of the intellect, which, being represented by a human-like charioteer, is pulled by the two horses that carry it to the peak of the universe where it contemplates or “sees” the Forms: the intellect may not move by itself, or separately, but it is located and changes location.

over (and beyond) the entire animal kingdom.⁵ In this way, Plato's images express that side of ourselves that is never simply "ours" but, rather, connects us to the variety of life in the universe. At the same time, and closer to home, these images also reflect our human environment. Alongside animal shapes, both the *Phaedrus* and *Republic* IX use the human figure to represent the intellectual part of the composite image. It is easy to read this choice as an anthropocentrism that we cannot escape, but it is equally important to understand that these images are tentative self-portraits of a human creator. They are unquestionably epistemic tools, but they are also works of art that accurately reflect the properly human capacities. If Plato, like Aristotle, endows human shape and function with a clearly affirmed cosmic privilege,⁶ this privilege also carries a responsibility for the uniquely human and fragile setting known as the city. And it is the *Republic*, more than any other dialogue, that connects this responsibility to the nature of the soul.

2 The *Republic* and the Soul's (Two or Three) Parts

Before coming fully into focus in Book IV, the need to unify the soul's various actions enters the dialogue during the discussion of justice as peaceful harmony that opposes injustice as disharmonious strife. This opposition is structurally similar, if not identical, in the city and the soul, and so in both cases, justice is a precondition of good government. In this respect, the *Republic* shares its core premise with the *Phaedo*, where, as we saw in Chapter 2, Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that the soul should govern the body and that this government is natural and follows from the soul's much higher simplicity. The *Republic* clearly espouses this basic assumption, but its focus on the soul as not only an epistemic but also a political agent leads to a more articulate discussion of different degrees of simplicity and unity *within*

5 The *Phaedrus* notoriously exemplifies this elasticity by Socrates' musing, early in the dialogue, about his lack of self-knowledge and the possible extent of his true nature from "a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon" to "tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature" (230a3–6). On "theriomorphic" features of the soul, see Morgan 2012.

6 This is most clearly stated in the *Timaeus*. I cannot deal here with the latter, nor with its account of human shape and posture that will be reworked in Aristotle (see, especially, *De partibus animalium* II 10, and IV 10). On human posture in Plato and Aristotle, see Gregorić 2005.

the soul itself.⁷ This discussion will also extend to eschatology and the soul's immortality in Book x, but the previous nine books are firmly rooted in human city. This is not simply because the soul has to deal with the complexity of the city; it is because the soul's structure *determines* it.

This perspective, whereby the city is the reflection of the soul rather than vice versa, shifts the explanatory weight, so to speak, onto the soul's agency. But it also precludes Socrates from treating the latter as a tightly unified agent. The complexity that we see around us does not arise through some combination of mutually external and internally indivisible atomic souls. It is a projection of the complexity within each and every incarnate soul, although, on Socrates' account, some regularity does exist that makes it possible to classify the internal variety into "five forms of individual souls" (VIII, 545e4–5, cf. IV, 445d1) and to treat all other characters as intermediate between them. What makes this regularity possible and prevents our individual natures from getting more and more fragmented as we look into them (cf. III, 395b3–4), is the tripartite model of the soul as elaborated in Book IV and put to use in Books VIII–IX. I use the term "model" to underscore that it presents us, unavoidably, with a simplification of the soul's original situation: it is a sort of negotiated middle ground between atomic individuality and unmanageable fractioning that would take precedence on a different scale. Also, it is an image, although before the great *eikōn* forged from various creatures in Book IX, all the parts or functions of the soul took on the appearance of humans, with a few domestic animals added for greater vividness.

Tripartition is thus an imaginative response to the dilemmas arising from the recognition of multiple and often conflicting impulses that seek to monopolize the soul's agency by overpowering other impulses. As Plato makes clear, identifying various parts of the soul while claiming that "each of us has within himself the same parts and characteristics as the city" is a methodological shortcut (IV, 435d1–e3).⁸ Such an analogy endows the invisible

7 A similar view of "the partitioning strategy" in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* is summarized in Bobonich 2002, 217–218. Bobonich's account is highly commendable, but I tend to agree with Burnyeat 2006, 2 n. 2, that explaining akrasia need not be taken for the "main goal and accomplishment of Plato's soul division". This point is also made, and developed in much more detail, in Wilburn 2014. See also Shields 2006.

8 The translation "each of us has within himself" uses the masculine "himself" to render the equally masculine ἐν ἑαυτῷ. This is a purely grammatical convention that is not intended to imply any gender bias, although it cannot be denied that Plato, like the vast majority of authors before the late 20th century, uses the masculine (grammatical) gender as the default form. I mention this issue here because it may be more closely related to the

soul with a vividly imaginable and active life that is far from some hidden interiority. To grasp the soul's agency, or perhaps multiple agencies, Socrates exports it on the outside, as it were, in a gesture strongly parallel to his creation of the image of the soul, which plays the role of a similar shortcut in the *Phaedrus* (see explicitly at 246a4–6). In the *Republic*, as I said already, the result is more complex because of its use of the structure of the city as an image and, indeed, expression of the structure of the soul. The *Phaedrus* depicts the soul as an assemblage of two animal species that are tied together by the erotic urge, which, for all its variety in the soul's different parts, gives the resulting picture the flavor of a certain *natural* unity. In contrast, there is no such unity in the *Republic* where Socrates starts from a very different group of functions (*erga*) that only the soul can perform.

These functions have a strong political orientation. In his list, Socrates includes “taking care of things, ruling, deliberating, and the like” (τὸ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι καὶ ἄρχειν καὶ βουλευέσθαι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα πάντα, 353d5–6), and if he adds “living” (τὸ ζῆν, 353d9), this function will play no further role in his argument. Instead, the enumerated functions need to be accompanied by a recognition “that there is a virtue of a soul” (ἀρετὴν τινα ψυχῆς εἶναι, 353d11), which enables the soul to perform its function well.⁹ That Socrates immediately exemplifies the soul's virtue through justice does not mean that justice, defined independently of the soul's particular tasks, is what the soul must possess in order to perform those tasks well. Rather, it is the good performance, focused on the task at hand, that helps Socrates define justice as “doing one's own”: a minimal definition independent of (if not contradictory to) the conception of justice as a Form and object of knowledge different from all objects of belief. It is, indeed, a definition based on crafts, not on the intellectual pursuit of objects that are always and never change in any respect.

The definition of justice as “doing one's own” is, of course, developed later, in Book iv, during the discussion that precedes and largely conditions the famous argument for the soul's tripartition. Crucially, however, the formal dimension of this argument, which is credited with introducing the

strategies of personification than to the topics of previous chapters. After a careful consideration, I follow Plato's text without erasing his (grammatical) gender preferences.

9 I leave aside the detail of this argument, including its possible influence on Aristotle's *ergon* argument (on this issue, see Baker 2015, 231–236). I only wish to point out that Plato's general characterization of the relation between an agent and its proper activity is slightly ambiguous: the proper *ergon* of a thing is what *only* this thing can do or can do it *better* than other things (see I, 352e2–3 and 353a10–11).

principle of non-contradiction (436b9–c2), is constantly complemented by a close attention to the relations of power. So much so that it leads Socrates to conclude that it is true of a just person “that every part within her does its own work, whether it’s ruling or being ruled” (αὐτοῦ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ ἕκαστον τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττει ἀρχῆς τε πέρι καὶ τοῦ ἄρχεσθαι) and that justice “is this power” (εἶναι ἡ ταύτην τὴν δύναμιν) (443b1–5).¹⁰ Ideally, the functions of the soul enumerated in Book I (“taking care of things, ruling, deliberating”) guarantee a benevolent exercise of this power, be it in the individual soul or the city as a whole. Nevertheless, the soul, and therefore the city, live in a permanent state of tension between its “better” and “worse” parts.

The talk about the better and worse parts of the soul is, as I noted earlier, reminiscent of the *Phaedo* and its polarity between the better part of us, which should naturally rule, and the worse part, which should be ruled. The *Republic* establishes a similar polarity during Socrates’ discussion of moderation (σωφροσύνη), a virtue different from, but associated with justice and equally important for achieving the practical unity of the soul’s actions. This passage precedes by some five pages the reasoning that will institute the three “official” parts of the soul, but it is no less important for our understanding of the soul’s original nature that the tripartition strives to impose on the soul some distinctions that would not amount to differences in degree, which the power relations almost unavoidably are. The passage on moderation deserves to be quoted almost in full because it contains three motifs that will play an important role in the image of the tripartite soul in Book IX: a multiplicity ordered in a non-arbitrary way (a *kosmos*); power relations as inherent to human constitution; and a bipartition of the soul into its naturally smaller but better part and its larger but worse part.¹¹ This is how Socrates connects these issues at IV, 430e6–431b2:

Moderation is surely a kind of order (κόσμος τις), the mastery (ἐγκράτεια) of certain kinds of pleasures and desires. People indicate as much when they use the phrase “self-control” (κρείττω δὴ αὐτοῦ) and other

10 Bobonich 1994, 3–17, offers a similar distinction between the two perspectives. He proceeds to a detailed discussion of the perspective of power, which he splits into the “Command Model” and the “Force Model”. His article shows how these options develop the implications of the principle of non-contradiction.

11 It should be stressed right away that these two parts of the soul at IV, 430–431, belong to an argument different from the one for bipartition in Book X, 602–603. The comparison of both texts is beyond the scope of this chapter. On the argument in Book X, see, at least, Ganson 2009.

similar phrases. I don't know just what they mean by them, but they are, so to speak, like tracks or clues that moderation has left behind in language. Isn't that so?

Absolutely.

Yet isn't the expression "self-control" (κρείττω αὐτοῦ) ridiculous? The stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to in all such expressions (ὁ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ κρείττων καὶ ἥττων δῆπου ἂν αὐτοῦ εἴη καὶ ὁ ἥττων κρείττων).

Of course.

Nonetheless, the expression is apparently trying to indicate that, in the soul of that very human being (ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν), there is a better part and a worse one and that, whenever the naturally better part is in control of the worse (τὸ βέλτιον φύσει τοῦ χείρονος ἐγκρατὲς ἦ), this is expressed by saying that the person is self-controlled or master of himself. At any rate, one praises someone by calling them self-controlled. But when, on the other hand, the smaller and better part is overpowered by the larger and worse (κρατηθῆ ὑπὸ πλείθους τοῦ χείρονος σμικρότερον τὸ βέλτιον), because of bad upbringing or bad company, this is called being self-defeated (ἥττω ἑαυτοῦ) or licentious and is a reproach.

Especially in comparison with the later argument for the "official" tripartition, this text has received less attention than it deserves. It was rightly noted that it anticipates the later passages in that it "employs both formal and observational premises."¹² The former concerns the phrase translated as "self-control", which should perhaps be rendered, more literally, as "stronger than oneself": a way of speaking that Socrates attributes to the ordinary and imprecise use of language. The logical problem involved in this expression is similar to the one that is pointed out in other dialogues, including *Charmides* 168b–c or *Parmenides* 141b–c, both of which insist that, for instance, being "greater than itself" implies that the same thing is also "smaller than itself". In the quoted passage, Socrates immediately recurs to distinguishing between a better and a worse *part* of the human soul, which solves the logical problem. But there is more to his reformulation than an attempt to solve a logical puzzle through a precise use of language. The issue of mastery or ἐγκράτεια apparently makes it permissible to give an account of oneself in

¹² Moline 1978, 3.

terms of a moral, and therefore political (if not downright military) struggle.¹³ In this context, care for logical coherence is important, but not more so than judgments of value concerning the “better” and “worse” elements that are variously discovered in our soul, in ourselves, or in cities. This latter case will be prominent in the *Laws*, which adopt the distinction of a smaller and better part opposed to a larger but worse part and uses it to legitimate the talk of “the victory over oneself” (τὸ νικᾶν αὐτὸν αὐτόν) as the best victory of all (I, 626e2–4; and cf. 627a6–10 on the city as κρείττων ἑαυτῆς when ruled by a smaller number of those who are better).¹⁴

This also explains why, when the three parts of the soul are established in Book IV, the bipartition into the soul’s better and worse parts does not lose its validity. Indeed, the co-presence of both schemes highlights the importance of strategic alliances that directly affect the order or destruction of order in the soul and the city alike. Seen in this light, the image of the soul at IX, 588b10–589b7, enables Socrates to bring these two perspectives together by bringing out the tumultuous nature of the power relations within the soul without disrupting its tidier tripartite scheme. In addition, as we will see, by containing two human figures, one within and one without the soul, that image reminds us of the almost unavoidable back and forth between the talk about the soul and the talk about the human individual – a back and forth that is apparent in Book IV and exposes certain limits of analogy between the structure of the city and the structure of the soul. To put this point as clearly as possible: for this analogy to work, Socrates needs to reduce human beings to souls with their agency or agencies, but while doing so, he cannot simply *substitute* souls for human beings since it is the human beings who inhabit and indeed constitute the city.¹⁵ The imperfect but workable solution is to find the part of the soul that best represents a human being by representing the core of what makes us human. It is not a surprise that, like in the *First Alcibiades*, this part of the soul is the intellect, which gives Socrates the option of making us *imagine*, symmetrically, the intellect as a human being. From a logical point of view, this is dangerously

13 I cannot discuss the complex but fascinating issue of ἐγκράτεια in Plato here. For such a discussion, see Dorion 2012 and 2018.

14 For a list of other relevant passages in the *Laws*, see Wilburn 2012, 26 n. 3. We may add that the formally same problem concerns the self-moving soul, but the *Phaedrus*, which posits this self-motion most clearly, introduces the tripartition as its obvious solution: as noted above (n. 4), the intellect or charioteer is described as being moved by the two lower parts, the horses.

15 Thein 2005 gives a more detailed account of this limit of the analogy between the soul and the city.

close to a magician's trick, but it is literally what the image of the soul in Book IX does.

This operation is not entirely smooth. Even if we understand why only the intellect will be personified in human shape while other soul-parts will be given animal shapes,¹⁶ we cannot help but wonder whether the three parts of the soul are not more mutually permeable than the talk about their power relations and domination suggests. To Socrates' credit, his original and unusually complex image elaborated in Book IX hints at such a possibility by its overall structure, where a human figure stands for the intellect yet *all three parts* are parts of a human being. The resulting tension, which is a crucial but sometimes overlooked feature of the whole image, could hardly have escaped Plato's attention.

3 The Monstrous Image in *Republic IX*

Thanks to its vividness and its uncertain ontology, an image can fill in the gaps where argument stumbles. Image is by definition never simple, yet it tends to create the impression of a unity. Clearly, no one knows better than Plato that such a unity may easily be a false and misleading one. Perhaps a partial remedy for this defect is to offer an image that does not hide its inner workings and its own complexity. Such an image can represent a whole while at the same time bringing out most vividly the complications inherent in that whole's composition. This is exactly what the image of the soul in *Republic IX* does.

In its own way, this image is almost a commentary on the issue of fragmented agency that has worried a number of interpreters. However, Socrates' first and explicit motivation for sculpting the image of the soul – I use his own term – is to refute the view that injustice is advantageous to those who, while being perfectly unjust, manage to appear just. This is a return to one of the main issues discussed throughout the dialogue. In Book IX, Socrates wants to make evident the respective consequences of just and

16 In this context, Kamtekar 2006, 177–179, establishes a useful difference between personification and partition (and their aims), and examines the relation between the personification and the soul-city analogy. She offers two options, namely, “that the personified depiction of the soul is a side-effect of the city-soul analogy chosen for other purposes (which purposes?), or that the city-soul analogy was chosen in part because it personifies the soul” (179). I believe that both options imply, precisely, a certain equivocation between souls and humans that affects the working of the analogy.

unjust actions, and for that it is necessary to enter inside the human being, where what one *appears* to be cannot replace what one really *is*. It is therefore to refute appearances that Socrates decides to build an image (εἰκῶν) as a means of showing what cannot be perceived directly.

I will first quote the creation of the image (588b10–e2) and offer an interpretation of its structure; then I will move on to Socrates' explanation of what this structure means for our actions (588e3–589b7). First, then, the detailed instructions intended to guide our imagination. The problem is how to discuss the nature of justice and injustice with someone who claims that injustice profits those who are completely unjust but are considered by others to be just. This, says Socrates, we will discuss

by fashioning an image of the soul in words (εἰκόνα πλάσαντες τῆς ψυχῆς λόγῳ), so that the person who says this sort of thing will know what he is saying.

What sort of image?

One like those creatures that legends tell us used to come into being in ancient times (μυθολογούνται παλαιαὶ γενέσθαι φύσεις), such as the Chimera, Scylla, Cerberus, or any of the multitude of others in which many different kinds of things are said to have grown together naturally into one (συμπεφυκυῖα ἰδέαι πολλὰ εἰς ἓν γενέσθαι).

Yes, the legends do tell us of such things.

Well, then, fashion a single kind of multicolored beast with a ring of many heads (πλάττε τοίνυν μίαν μὲν ἰδέαν θηρίου ποικίλου καὶ πολυκεφάλου) that it can grow and change at will—some from gentle, some from savage animals (ἡμέρων καὶ ἀγρίων).

That's work for a clever artist. However, since words are more malleable than wax and the like (εὐπλαστότερον κηροῦ καὶ τῶν τοιούτων λόγος), consider it done.

Then fashion one other kind, that of a lion, and another of a human being (μίαν δὲ τοίνυν ἄλλην ἰδέαν λέοντος, μίαν δὲ ἀνθρώπου). But make the first much the largest and the other second to it in size.

That's easier—the sculpting is done.

Now join the three of them into one (σύναπτε τοίνυν αὐτὰ εἰς ἓν τρία ὄντα), so that they somehow grow together naturally (ὥστε πῃ συμπεφυκέναι ἀλλήλοις).

They're joined.

Then, fashion around them the image of one of them, that of a human being (περίπλασον δὴ αὐτοῖς ἔξωθεν ἑνὸς εἰκόνα, τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) so that to anyone who sees only the outer covering (τὸ ἔξω)

and not what's inside (τὰ ἐντός) it will appear to be a single creature, a human being (ἐν ζῶον φαίνεσθαι, ἄνθρωπον).

It's done (περιπέπλασται). (588b10–e2)

The proposed visualization, which is a verbally sculpted soul (see the repeated use of the verb πλάσσω, “to shape” or “to mold”), has two different yet equally obvious features: it takes up the previous relating of the lower soul-parts to either some nobler animal (the case of the spirited part) or to an untamed beast (the case of the appetite), but it also possesses a higher degree of structural complexity. Let me start with the lowest part and proceed through the spirit to the intellect, whose figuration is co-responsible for the aforementioned complexity.

In fact, it is already the description of the soul's lowest part that turns the whole image into a sort of mirror maze. This follows from Socrates' first two steps: he announces that he will create an image similar to those of multi-form mythological monsters, whose bodies are *naturally* fused together, which is clearly meant to be the image of the whole soul (see the συμπεφυκυῖαι at 588c4 echoed by συμπεφυκέναι related to all three parts at 588d7–8); but then he applies the same procedure to the image of the soul's lowest part, which also comes out as a many-headed beast. The result is two beasts with essentially the same imaginary structure, but also with one important difference: whereas the soul is said to grow together naturally, just like a mythological creature, the reference to a natural process of growing together is absent from the account of the many-headed appetite, which mentions growth and the capacity for transformation but not integration. The appetite is an accumulation of poorly integrated desires, so that, as we will see shortly, the functional unity of diverse appetites is best guaranteed by a specifically human artifice, namely money-making. This only reinforces the impression that Socrates' partly similar description of the complexity of the whole soul and the complexity of the appetite is meant as a warning against the appetite's readiness to swallow the whole soul. In this way, the first part of the image already suggests a complicated relationship between what is within and without this or that part of the soul.

In this respect, it is worth noting that, rather surprisingly, the figuration of the appetite as the many-headed beast remains very abstract.¹⁷ In contrast to the whole soul (compared to Chimera, Scylla, and Cerberus), to the

17 This is also true about the later designation of this part as “snakelike” (ὄφειώδης, 590b1), which reflects its serpentine complexity without detailing its winding, so to speak.

spirited part (imagined as a lion), and to the rational part (depicted as a human being), the first description of appetite does not borrow any image of either a mythological beast or a natural animal kind.¹⁸ Apparently, this most eclectic part or region of the soul has no logically graspable principle nor does it exhibit one pattern of behavior that would aim at some single goal. This makes even an imaginary unification of appetite difficult, which is further confirmed by Socrates' claim that some of its heads are from gentle and some from savage animals (this is an important difference from Hydra, which is often read into this text). All this is perfectly consistent with the explanation of the appetite in Book IV.¹⁹ Still, the image in Book IX reinforces certain features of that explanation. At the same time, the image also develops Socrates' claims about the lowest and largest part of the soul that we find in two previous passages of Book IX. The first passage, at the very beginning of Book IX, describes how the soul's beastly part awakens when the rational part slumbers in sleep; the second passage, at 580d–581a, relates the parts of the soul to different kinds of pleasure.

Thanks to modern psychology, the awakening of the beastly part that is responsible for lawless dreams is one of the most famous passages of the *Republic*, where it opens Socrates' discussion of the tyrannic character.²⁰ The dreams in question express those of our “unnecessary pleasures and desires” that happen to be lawless (571b4–5): they represent awful transgressions that perhaps any person may imagine, but only the tyrant acts on his worst desires when awake. The desires and pleasures in question are

those that are awakened in sleep, when the rest of the soul – the rational, gentle, and ruling part (λογιστικὸν καὶ ἡμερον καὶ ἄρχον) – slumbers. Then the beastly and savage part (τὸ δὲ θηριώδες τε καὶ ἄγριον), full of food and drink, casts off sleep and seeks to find a way to gratify itself. You know that there is nothing it won't dare to do at such a time, free

18 As in the preceding paragraph, I follow closely the quoted text. Many interpreters assume that Chimera, Scylla and Cerberus at 588c2–3 are *already* the images of the appetite. However, the latter is only created at 588c7–10, beginning with instruction to imagine *μίαν μὲν ἰδέαν θηρίου ποικίλου καὶ πολυκεφάλου*.

19 At 590b7, Socrates will also echo the equivalence between the appetite and the unruly crowd or mob, first suggested at VI, 493a6–c8 (where the sophists are those who try to charm it).

20 In the following paragraphs, I will not attempt a detailed exegesis of *Republic* IX on dreaming, but focus only on what is directly relevant for the image of the soul at 588b10–e2. See Thein 2019 for the complete picture, including references to various interpretations.

of all control by shame or reason. It doesn't shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god, or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In a word, it omits no act of folly or shamelessness. (IX, 571c3–d4)

This description clearly echoes the soul's "alternative" bipartition into a ruling and a ruled part: the gentle, rational ruler is presumed (but sometimes fails) to impose their laws upon the unruly beast that tries to follow its lawless desires. But, insofar as we talk about dreams, these desires express themselves in images, which confirms that even the lowest part of the soul "has the ability to imagine complex scenarios."²¹ Being "bestly and savage", it not only aspires to overturn the "rational and gentle" rule of rationality, but – when we move from dreams to the city threatened by a tyrant – it can also conceive of means of achieving this goal.

Lines 571c3–d4 enumerate various transgressions, but their image of the appetite is simpler than its image at 588b10–e2, not in the least because it leaves aside the tame side of the appetite, which is presumably related to the money-making activities: a banker can be as lethal as a tyrant, but their outward behavior is not the same. More importantly, these lines stay *within* the soul and limit themselves to sketching the polarity of the rightful ruler and their disobedient subject. Socrates, however, will immediately return not only to the soul's tripartite scheme, but also to the ambiguity of a human being endowed with a soul and the intellect within that soul. Again, this ambiguity is closely connected to the issue of agency: how to best describe the action of a person for which only a part of that person is explicitly responsible? As in the same way as in the image of the soul quoted above, Socrates avoids the problem by simply shifting the perspective of a human person and the perspective of the intellect. This shift occurs in the lines where Socrates, in order to strengthen us against unruly dreams, instructs us how to prepare for morally correct dreaming by manipulating all three parts of the soul:

On the other hand, I suppose that someone who is healthy and moderate with himself (αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ σωφρόνως) goes to sleep only after having roused his rational part (τὸ λογιστικόν) and nourished it with fine arguments and inquiries while neither starving nor feasting his

21 Moline 1978, 11.

appetitive part (τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν), so that they will slumber and not disturb his best part (τῷ βελτίστῳ) with either their pleasure or their pain, but they'll leave it alone, pure and by itself (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μόνον καθαρὸν), to get on with its investigations, to yearn after and perceive something that it does not know, whether it is past, present, or future; also having soothed his spirited part in the same way, for example, by not falling asleep with his spirit still aroused after an outburst of anger; and when he has quieted these two parts and aroused the third, in which reason resides (ἐν ᾧ τὸ φρονεῖν ἐγγίγνεται), and so takes his rest, you know that it is then that he best grasps the truth and that the visions that appear in his dreams (αἱ ὄψεις φαντάζονται τῶν ἐνυπνίων) are least lawless. (IX, 571d6–572b1)

Regardless of the epistemological issue raised by the kind of truth that the intellect grasps in our dreams, these instructions agree perfectly with how Socrates will comment on his own image of the soul later in Book IX. The difference is that here, before the image with its unusual structure is sculpted, the text differentiates more freely between the person and “their” intellect: it is the person that handles the soul’s two lower parts and so enables the intellect to be “alone, pure and by itself”. On reflection, however, what is attributed here to the human person, who handles the three parts of “their” soul, can only be performed by these parts, in this case by the intellect that exhorts itself and calms down the spirit and the appetite. Naturally, such a conclusion about the quoted passage does not preclude us from reading it metaphorically rather than taking the soul-parts for agent-like. It would be premature to discuss the entire issue of this reading, which removes all reality from the soul-parts, but I will evaluate it in the final section of this chapter, arguing that it may be closer to our common-sense view of persons as agents than Plato’s intentions in Book IX and possibly elsewhere.

These intentions become clearer if we keep our focus on Socrates’ description of the lowest part of the soul, whose account reiterates, at its own level, the problem of disunity. Books VIII–IX could furnish a lot of material for further analyses, but our context is still one of the commentary on the image at IX, 588b10–e2, and there is the second promised passage that awaits us: a brief but revealing correlation between the parts of the soul and different kinds of pleasure at 580d3–581a1. As in other cases, this correlation is not only about the different pleasures and their objects but also about the relative power of the soul parts since it is the ruling part that determines the overall behavior of each person (581b12–c1). Here the motif of the ruling part is directly related to tripartition, so that the following summary of the

latter is the foundation upon which Socrates will build his account of further tensions and conflict in the soul. The summary is as follows:

[...] it seems to me that there are three pleasures corresponding to the three parts of the soul, one peculiar to each part, and similarly with desires and kinds of rule.

What do you mean?

The first, we say, is the part with which a human being learns (ἦν ᾧ μανθάνει ἄνθρωπος), and the second the part with which she gets angry (τὸ δὲ ᾧ θυμοῦται). As for the third, we had no one special name for it, since it's multiform (πολυειδίαν), so we named it after the biggest and strongest thing in it (ἀλλὰ ὃ μέγιστον καὶ ἰσχυρότατον εἶχεν ἐν αὐτῷ, τούτῳ ἐπωνομάσαμεν). Hence we called it the appetitive part (ἐπιθυμητικὸν γὰρ αὐτὸ κεκλήκαμεν), because of the intensity of its appetites for food, drink, sex, and all the things associated with them, but we also called it the money-loving part (καὶ φιλοχρήματον δὴ), because such appetites are most easily satisfied by means of money. (IX, 580d3–581a1)

While enumerating the three parts, Socrates speaks again about the human being as *a user* of these parts. More exactly, the dative ᾧ is employed to describe “with which” we learn and get angry, but it is omitted from the description of the lowest part. This is not an accident since this part requires a different description, one whose focus is on its strength or power. At the same time, it is characterized by its πολυειδία that foreshadows its being ποικίλον καὶ πολυκεφάλον in the later image. What is unique about the quoted passage is the admission that because of this πολυειδία, the soul's lowest and biggest part has no truly proper name. As a result, this biggest part is usually named after its own biggest part, unless we give it the name that seems to account for the presence of the tame heads in the later many-headed image of the appetite. This second name is important because it brings out the diversity of the lowest part, which is not limited to blind, brutal physical desires. The name itself, τὸ φιλοχρήματον, was already used in the discussion of the soul-parts in Book IV, where it characterized the money-loving Phoenicians and Egyptians in whom the lowest part of the soul predominated (436a1–3). Clearly, all economic activity is relegated to this level and its practitioners are not only those who love money as a means of satisfying their desires but also those who simply love money and whose desire for it turns the means into the end.

The love of money finds its expression in timocracy (549b) and oligarchy (551a, 553c, 554a), but more importantly it reminds us of the calmly calculating desires that threaten to influence our intellect by their own, broadly speaking, economic rationality. Not all money-making is for the sake of “food, drink, sex, and all the things associated with them”, as Socrates puts it. In fact, he does not say that all money-making is subservient in this way, but he also does not really explain where in our soul the place of desiring money for its own sake would be. That such a desire exists is pointed out by Socrates very early on, during his initial dialogue with Cephalus who, being a money-maker who has inherited his fortune, differs from those who had to create their own and who love their money “just as poets love their poems and fathers love their children” (I, 330c2). Such people may be rightly despised,²² but they are clearly different from those who follow their “beastly” appetites (on appetite as a beast driven by thirst, see IV, 439b4–5). In this way, the distinction between the three parts of the soul on the basis of the objects of their desire does not do justice to that form of rationality, which does not aim at perfect and immutable objects of philosophical knowledge and is, by consequence, relegated to simple calculation. This confirms that the tripartition itself is a necessarily simplified image but also one that repeatedly indicates its simplified nature: if it suggests multiple agencies in our soul, these cannot be limited to just three basic options. This does not necessarily mean that we have to proceed to further and further divisions and subdivisions of the appetitive part, but it means that tripartition is an approximation whose main virtue consists in a vivid presentation of not simply the soul’s divided agency, but its capacity to act *on itself* – and no such action can be *described* and even less so *visualized* without tracing some lines of division.

This brings us back to our main text, the image crafted at 588b10–e2. Moving from the lowest part of the soul to the next two parts, the spirit and the intellect, Socrates leaves behind the mythological beasts and turns instead to living species known from sense experience. Hence the laconic instruction to “fashion one other kind, that of a lion, and another of a human being. But make the first much the largest and the other second to it in size” (588d3–5). This brevity corresponds to the well-known shapes of the creatures in question, and, concerning the spirited part or lion, no

22 See I, 347b1. Socrates also implies that money-makers are weak and slavish (II, 373d; III, 391c). Still, when asked to distinguish soldiers from money-makers (III, 416a1), Socrates has a lot to say about the former and little about the latter. For more on money and markets in the *Republic*, see Weinstein 2009 and Helmer 2010.

additional explanation is added. Of all the soul-parts, the spirited one is apparently the most straightforward in its morally motivated actions that are not grounded in intellectual knowledge. The choice of a lion rather than a horse or a dog is probably due to the willingness to use a striking image of an animal that is not only hard to subdue but also contrasts with domestic animals.²³ If a horse or a dog served as examples of “invincible and unbeatable spirit” that “makes the whole soul fearless and unconquerable” (11, 375a11–b2), and if it is the shared qualities of their θυμοειδές that underlie the introduction of the guardians as philosopher dogs in Book IV (see, e.g., 440d2–3 on the spirited part as a dog calmed down by the intellect as a shepherd), a lion fits well in their company. Indeed, the adjective θυμοειδές, borrowed from the vocabulary of horse breeding, is unusual enough that its use to describe dogs, horses, a lion, and the guardians leaves little doubt about the character in question.²⁴ The substantive τὸ θυμοειδές, which seems to have been coined by Plato, perfectly conveys a mixture of ferocity and nobility.

After the spirited part comes the intellect, and things get complicated again. It is, however, a very different kind of complexity than the one associated with appetite. Neither myth nor nature is helpful here since their realms cannot produce a proper *image* of the intellect, whose proper *objects* are the Forms. If the appetite was difficult to visualize because of its complexity, the intellect cannot be visualized because of its simplicity. Socrates finds his way around this difficulty by making us imagine the intellect as a human being: our own shape is the best form when it comes to the figuration of thought. However, this solution has a catch. Because the whole image is the image of our human soul, using a human being to personify one part of this soul results in the explicit duplication of human figure. Not only does Socrates not avoid this duplication, but he instructs Glaucon to “fashion around them [sc. the three parts] the image of one of them, that of a human being” (588d10–11). We end up, within one complex image, with the “inner” and the “outer” human being. The logical outcome is that, by

23 Any of these animals, more specifically their images, would also contrast with the ape-like appearance of the spirited part when it is perverted and guided by the appetite (see 590b9: “it becomes an ape instead of a lion”). On the choice of the lion in our passage and the lion’s typical character, see, e.g., Gastaldi 2013, 294–295.

24 We know from Xenophon that the adjective θυμοειδές can characterize horses naturally eager to take part in the hunt. See Harrison 1953, who lists seven different passages. Jaeger 1946 makes a connection to the possible first use of θυμοειδές in the Hippocratic treatise *Airs Waters Places*, but, given the context, Xenophon, or simply the horse breeders, seem to be a more natural source.

offering the same image of the whole and of one of its parts, Socrates initiates an infinite regress: if the “inner” human being is really the same as the “outer” human being, it contains within itself the same three parts, of which one part would again contain three parts, and so on. It is true that Socrates remarks that “anyone who sees only the outer covering and not what’s inside will think it is a single creature, a human being” (588d₁–e₁), but this describes the perspective of a person ignorant of the previous instructions. Like Glaucon, we have followed the creation of the image step by step and cannot “unimagine” its internal composition, where the absence of the intellect’s proper image reinforces the complexity of the image as such (I have already said that, by definition, there *cannot* be completely simple images, be they material or mental).

Naturally, Plato may have introduced the self-replicating image precisely to make us aware of the impossibility of properly imagining the intellect and its objects. This would explain the willingness to exploit a regress that is structurally very similar to the one that Socrates warns us against in the case of the Forms (see x, 597c₁–d₃).²⁵ In any case, the result makes us alert to the difficulties inherent in dealing with the intellect in a political rather than strictly epistemological context. In Book IX, where political context prevails, Socrates’ subsequent explanation of the complex image quickly establishes the intellect as the master that should rule over the lower parts of the soul. Such a rule, which we have already noticed in other passages of the dialogue (and, in Chapter 2, in the *Phaedo*), endows the intellect with an agency the exercise of which the *Republic* describes as a real struggle for power. Clearly, the knowledge acquired by the intellect does not automatically suppress the resistance of desires that oppose it. The intellect must conquer the lower parts in a different way, employing house management strategies and thus becoming the undisputed master of its house and itself. Socrates frames this strategy with reference to the initial question of whether justice or injustice is truly profitable:

But, on the other hand, wouldn’t someone who maintains that just things are profitable be saying, first, that all our words and deeds

25 On 597c₁–d₃, see, e.g., Nerlich 1960, Duff-Forbes 1968, Parry 1979. Cf. also the warning against the regress based on likeness in *Parmenides* 132d₅–133a₃; and cf. *Timaeus* 31a₂–b₃ on the demiurge’s reasons for creating only one universe (where the regress concerns the likeness, not the paradigmatic Form as its model). I cannot analyze here the similarities of these arguments or the (perhaps more important) differences between them.

(ταῦτα πράττειν καὶ ταῦτα λέγειν) should insure that the human being within this human being has the most control (τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος ἔσται ἐγκρατέστατος); second, that he should take care of the many-headed beast as a farmer (τοῦ πολυκεφάλου θρέμματος ἐπιμελήσεται ὥσπερ γεωργός) who feeds and domesticates the gentle heads and prevents the savage ones from growing; and, third, that he should make the lion's nature his ally (σύμμαχον ποιησάμενος τὴν τοῦ λέοντος φύσιν), care for the community of all his parts, and bring them up in such a way that they will be friends with each other and with himself? (IX, 589a6–b6)

The shift from the struggle between political factions to the master's concern for his household reflects the supremacy of justice. In this context, in which the question of justice and the government of human desires come again to the foreground, Socrates does not hesitate to break through the mirroring of the inner and the outer human being. This break does not take the form of some new doctrinal addition. Instead, in a move that we also find in other dialogues, it turns to the affinity between our intellect and the divine, so that the intellect is both what is best in us and what points beyond the human.

This becomes clear at 589c6–590d6, where Socrates proceeds in several steps that reinforce the authority of the divinized intellect. First, he introduces a three-part hierarchy that is different from the soul's tripartition but aims at putting the latter into practice: “fine things are those that subordinate the beastlike parts of our nature to the human (τὰ ὑπὸ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ) – or better, perhaps, to the divine (μᾶλλον δὲ ἴσως τὰ ὑπὸ τῷ θείῳ)” (589c8–d2). No possession can be valued apart from how we use it, and even the wealthiest person is wretched “if he pitilessly enslaves the most divine part of himself (τὸ ἐαυτοῦ θειότατον) to the most godless and polluted one” (589e4–5). The double superlative implies first the proximity to the divine and then the distance from it, and the superiority of the former is confirmed by Socrates' conclusion that those unable to restrain the beastly appetite should be “ruled by something similar to what rules the best person,” in other words “be the slave of that best person who has a divine ruler within himself (ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ θεῖον ἄρχον)” (590c8–d1). To put it generally, “it is better for everyone to be ruled by the divine and the intelligent (ὑπὸ θεοῦ καὶ φρονίμου), preferably within himself and his own (μάλιστα μὲν οἰκεῖον ἔχοντος ἐν αὐτῷ), otherwise imposed from without (ἔξωθεν ἐφεστῶτος)” (590d3–5).

But does this really reinforce, or rather limit, the agency of the intellect as part of the human soul? In our text, what is “divine” is left unexplained,

but Plato usually characterizes it by its simplicity and rationality, which also seems to be the case of “the divine paradigm” of justice in Book VI (500c9–e4) and of its echo at the very end of Book IX (“the paradigm in heaven”, 592b2).²⁶ This implies a firmly established course of action that does not allow for deviations, and, in this respect, the rule over human beings with complex souls would require a new kind of flexibility. In any case, what makes the rule in question possible is the presence of the intellect *and hence* of the divine element in each person. But, again, such an element is not inherently political (it rules in virtue of its better nature) and is also very different from individual human personality. After all, it is this element that unquestionably survives through the endless series of incarnations. All of this explains why Socrates does not return to the more narrowly political analogies when commenting on the previously fashioned image of the soul. Instead, he situates the soul on the scale that truly reaches from the beastly to the divine – a scale that, as we know from the previous chapter, reflects the variety of (re)incarnations. This does not mean that the adjective “divine” would not apply in the political domain (see VI, 497c, on the best constitution as divine and opposed to those that are “merely human”). But the divine is never only political, just as it cannot be personal. Indeed, its repeated mention in Book IX confirms that whenever we feel close to the soul’s core, Socrates moves it away from our human experience. Hence, probably, the final words of Book IX, where “the paradigm in heaven” presents itself as the soul’s only true and inalienable abode (592b3–5).

This final broadening of the horizon fits perfectly well with the image of the tripartite soul in the *Phaedrus* where a human being is also used as a figure of the intellect (see Chapter 3.3). Interestingly, the *Phaedrus* implies that gods have a similarly shaped intellect (246a6–8), which would strengthen the kinship between our souls and the divine souls that inhabit the heavens permanently (247e4–6). This kinship is, of course, established on the level of the image, but this level is no doubt important for an author who does not hesitate to present a human being, including its whole soul, as an image crafted by the demiurge and other gods. There certainly is an affinity between this creation as described in the *Timaeus* and our effort to follow Socrates’ instruction and mentally sculpt the image of our soul. This image is incomparably simpler than various compositional levels in the

26 The paradigm in Book VI is the Forms, especially Justice. But the paradigm in Book IX seems to imply that the true paradigm, which the philosophers would have to use to organize first themselves and then the city, includes the richer structure of the divinely ordered universe. I will return to these two passages elsewhere.

Timaeus, but what connects both texts is the imaginative treatment of agency and its ultimate source, which cannot be approached in any other way. This treatment is not an arbitrary fancy since it follows from a careful analysis of our desires and impulses, but it must reach beyond analysis if it is to illustrate vividly the recurring problem of the relation between human persons and their intellects that, in virtue of their capacity for a synoptic view of things, are alone capable of elaborating the whole scheme of tripartition. To paraphrase Kant on the *cogito*, the intellect must accompany the soul in all its representations. As a result, Socrates' recourse to the divine dimension of the intellect does not eliminate the ambiguity that follows from the presentation of the intellect as an inner human being.

4 The Image of the Soul in Book x

This irreducible complexity of Socrates' image of the soul helps us explain the persistence of modern debates about tripartition and agency. The next and final section of this chapter will reassess these debates where the arguments for opposite positions (the tripartition is taken to be real versus metaphorical) seem to carry equal weight and the decision in the matter is likely influenced by the interpreter's own feelings as a person. However, before this reevaluation, we should not overlook the presence of yet another image of the soul in the *Republic*. In Book x, after discussing the soul's immortality and arguing for the latter on the basis of its intrinsically indestructible nature, a nature that contains no internal flaw or defect that could be the starting point of its decomposition (see Chapter 3.2), Socrates warns us against thinking "that the soul in its truest nature is full of multicolored variety and unlikeness or that it differs with itself" (611b1–3). To emphasize this important point, he insists that not only the internally or otherwise indestructible soul is immortal, but that "it isn't easy for anything composed of many parts to be immortal if it isn't put together in the finest way (μὴ τῇ καλλίστῃ κεχρημένον συνθέσει), yet this is how the soul now appeared to us (ὥς νῦν ἡμῖν ἐφάνη ἡ ψυχή)" (611b5–7).

Following the argument for the immortality of the soul based on its unsailable coherence, this sentence confirms that even the immortal soul, properly conceived, does not *appear* to be partless, at least if we consider it in its present physical environment. Indeed, Socrates' next replica does not concern the difference between the soul's *appearing* multiform yet *being* partless, but the difference between the wrongly and correctly perceived arrangement of soul's parts, and, by the same token, the difference between

the wrong and correct perception of the soul's nature. Socrates' intention is not to reject, right here and now, all composite images of the soul; rather, he makes us imagine that the soul is endowed with the finest internal tuning. If, therefore, the following passage corrects the image from Book ix, where the soul was plunged into the political element, this correction turns the direction of the dialogue towards its eschatological horizon but does not introduce the "truest nature" of the soul as something entirely new:

But to grasp the soul as it is in truth (τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), we must not see (θεάσασθαι) it as it is while it is maimed by its association with the body and other evils (ὑπό τε τῆς τοῦ σώματος κοινωνίας καὶ ἄλλων κακῶν) – which is what we were doing earlier—but as it is in its pure state, that's how we should study (διαθεατέον) the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning. We'll then find that it is much finer than we thought and that we can see justice and injustice as well as all the other things we've discussed far more clearly (πολύ γε κάλλιον αὐτὸ εὐρήσει καὶ ἐναργέστερον δικαιοσύνας τε καὶ ἀδικίας διόψεται καὶ πάντα ἃ νῦν διήλθομεν). What we've said about the soul is true of it as it appears at present (οἷον ἐν τῷ παρόντι φαίνεται). But the condition in which we've studied it is like that of the sea god Glaucus, whose primary nature (τὴν ἀρχαίαν φύσιν) can't easily be made out by those who catch glimpses of him. Some of the original body parts (μέρη) have been broken off, others have been crushed, and he has been altogether maimed by the waves and by the shells, seaweeds, and stones that have attached themselves to him, so that he looks more like a wild animal than his natural self (ὥστε παντὶ μάλλον θηρίῳ εἰοικέναι ἢ οἷος ἦν φύσει). The soul, too, is in a similar condition when we study it (οὕτω καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμεῖς θεώμεθα), beset by many evils. That, Glaucon, is why we have to look somewhere else (ἐκεῖσε βλέπειν) [in order to discover its true nature]. (x, 611b10–d8)

While emphasizing the true purity of the soul without abandoning the idea of its parts, this explanation is remarkably ambiguous. Like the image in Book ix, it appeals to our imagination, but, instead of depicting the soul as an ensemble of independently imaginable creatures, it takes one creature, the sea god Glaucus, and evokes the distortion of his body parts, which ends up quite unrecognizable and assimilated to the sediments of various marine materials – so much so that Socrates describes it as resembling a beast rather than its own natural form. The choice of Glaucus hints at the understanding of our present habitat as a region of unlikeness, but it is no less

important that Glaucus is a transformed being: a mortal fisherman who, after eating a magical plant, became immortal while acquiring scales and other fish-like features.²⁷ His transformation is profoundly unsettling, as he becomes both god-like and beast-like. To this strange transformation, which he uses as an image of the soul's loss of its "original nature", Socrates immediately opposes the transformation performed by means of philosophy, which is described as a purifying activity and hence an antidote to the Glaucus-like suffering.

Since this possible and desirable transformation is presented as the last explicit word on the nature of the soul in the entire dialogue, it is important that it leads to a kind of provisional skepticism or unknowingness about the soul's "original" simplicity or complexity. This sits well with Socrates' summarizing statement on the matter, which points to the notion of "earned immortality" that we mentioned already in Chapters 2.1 and 2.5 in relation to the *Phaedo*. Here, however, it is the perspective of the soul's desire that dictates how philosophy as an activity is described, together with the instruction as to where we must look (βλέπειν) in order to perceive the soul's nature:

To its love of wisdom (εἰς τὴν φιλοσοφίαν αὐτῆς). We must realize what it grasps and longs to have intercourse with (καὶ ἐννοεῖν ὧν ἅπτεται καὶ οἷων ἐφίεται ὁμιλιῶν), because it is akin to the divine and immortal and what always is (συγγενὴς οὖσα τῷ τε θεῷ καὶ ἀθανάτῳ καὶ τῷ ἀεὶ ὄντι), and we must realize what it would become if it followed this longing with its whole being, and if the resulting effort lifted it out of the sea in which it now dwells, and if the many stones and shells (those which have grown all over it in a wild, earthy, and stony profusion because it feasts at those so-called happy feastings on earth) were hammered off it. Then we'd see what its true nature is and be able to determine whether it has many parts or just one (εἴτε πολυειδὴς εἴτε μονοειδὴς) and whether or in what manner it is put together (εἴτε ὅπῃ ἔχει καὶ ὅπως). But we've already accounted decently (ἐπεικῶς), I think, for its states and parts when it is immersed in human life (τὰ ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ βίῳ πάθῃ τε καὶ εἶδῃ). (X, 611e1–612a6)

27 This transformation is also described in many later sources, including its most vivid and detailed account, which is offered by Glaucus himself in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XIII, 904–967. In some of the later texts, the plant's effects also include aging.

When the soul loves wisdom and practices philosophy, it acts upon itself by following its natural desire for the eternal being. The phrase “the divine and immortal and what always is” echoes various passages from the previous books, beginning with the desire for “the being that always is” and “everything both divine and human as a whole” that characterizes the naturally philosophical soul in Book VI (485b2 and 486a5–6). To gain access to its own nature, then, the soul has to follow its first philosophical impulse, which originates in its kinship with what is divine and immutable. Still, Socrates stops short of concluding that the soul’s true nature is such and such. The main alternatives remain equally valid, and the real emphasis is on the process of coming close to the object of intellectual desire. All that has been said about the *πάθη τε καὶ εἶδη* of *human* soul may offer some indications for further inquiry, but the main focus of the quoted lines is on complementing the previously established essential immortality with the earned immortality understood as a promise of a bodiless life.²⁸

Such a focus counterbalances the absence of any definitive conclusion as to what the soul “truly” is and whether it will still have parts when it sheds the perceptible body. The promise of ascent, which is prepared by the image of the marine Glaucus (representing the submerged soul), is the obverse of the provisional skepticism about the soul’s true nature, a skepticism that – among other things – helps to avoid the possible tension between partlessness and agency. For if the soul were entirely partless or incomposite, all descriptions of what it does and what it suffers, even in the afterlife, would be not just metaphorical but incomprehensible. The only acts that would make sense would consist in the soul’s identification with the entirely simple object of its intellectual desire and knowledge. In contrast, all Platonic descriptions of the soul as the internally animate and animating cause imply that the soul’s original nature encompasses both its existence without the earthly body and its incarnation – this is why the soul can be reasonably or decently (*ἐπιεικῶς*) imagined as complex. Neither the *Phaedo* nor the *Republic* ever evoke some separate state of the soul that would be truly original in the sense of absolutely prior to the soul’s “first” incarnation. Expressing the yearning for truth and simplicity (and connecting truth with simplicity in the first place), the talk about the soul’s “truest nature” is a methodological and ethical device rather than an unequivocal revelation of the soul’s ontology.²⁹

28 For more on “earned” immortality, see again Sedley 2009 and Obdrzalek 2021.

29 It is only in the *Timaeus* that the soul receives an elaborate origin story. More specifically, the soul receives *two* stories that cleanly divide it into one immortal and two

All this confirms that the images of the soul in Books IX and X are complementary.³⁰ Together, they illustrate the extent of transformations that the soul undergoes without, however, losing its identity. This last point is crucial because it holds regardless of whether we extend or not the soul's partition into its life without an earthly body. But, again, this also does *not* mean that we are given any firm criteria for determining the identity in question. In the end, this identity is not entirely defined by the nature of the objects that the soul desires and strives to attain, whether intellectually or otherwise, since Plato's insistence on the soul's own and independent motion precludes the identification of even the intellect with something truly unchanging and self-identical in every respect. Hence, the obvious option of understanding the soul's identity as similar to the modern notion of personal identity, including its narrative dimension and the importance of memory.

This option seems compatible with Plato's various myths about the soul, but it is no less important to recognize that these myths also imply the impossibility of simply grounding the soul's identity in psychological continuity. The cosmological dimension of Plato's myths subordinates such a continuity to the impersonal perspective on the universe, a perspective that complements the soul-dependent eschatological dimension. The myths are at first continuous with the soul's previous actions that are punished or rewarded, but they use this continuity in order to distribute the souls through the animal kingdom regardless of the souls' psychological states (as Chapter 4 explained in detail). The final pages of the *Republic* fully conform to this scheme, but they also contain three unique moments that focus our attention more narrowly on the soul's person-like identity. Before turning to some more general remarks on the issue of agency, personhood, and personification, these three moments deserve a special mention, not in the least

mortal parts with different origins and compositions. At the same time, even the *Ti-maeus* assumes that the intellect's active does not consist only in its imitation of celestial revolutions. The intellect also disciplines and thus governs the soul's two lower parts.

30 For more on this complementarity, see Collobert 2000, 85–105. On the image in Book X, cf. 104: “sans nous donner la nature véritable de l'âme, l'image de Glaucos nous en fournit l'esquisse en nous montrant comment cette nature s'est transformée.” For a very similar conclusion, see also Woolf 2012, 151, who brings out the ethical dimension of the image in Book X.

because the myth depicts (or *should* depict) the souls after their ascent from the bodies as implied in the image of the “marine” soul.³¹

As told by Socrates, the myth recounts the testimony of a man named Er whom the gods revive after he is killed in battle and whom they send back as a messenger to human beings. Er’s story, as told (and explicitly edited) by Socrates, is rich in diverse events and places, including three unique events that have no direct parallel in other Platonic myths. The first of these events is inconspicuous, and the readers are rarely interested in its possible implications.³² We learn early in the myth that there is an opening in the earth and another in the heaven through which the souls who have spent their time being punished or rewarded arrive at a meadow, where the following spectacle takes place:

And the souls who were arriving all the time seemed to have been on long journeys, so that they went gladly to the meadow, like a crowd going to a festival, and camped there. Those who knew each other exchanged greetings (ἀσπάζεσθαι τε ἀλλήλας ὅσαι γνώριμαί), and those who come up from the earth asked those who came down from the heavens about the things there and were in turn questioned by them about the things below. And so they told their stories to one another (διηγείσθαι δὲ ἀλλήλαις), the former weeping as they recalled all they had suffered and seen on their journey below the earth, which lasted a thousand years, while the latter, who had come from heaven, told about how well they had fared and about the inconceivably fine and beautiful sights they had seen. (x, 614e1–615a4)

This passage might be read as the crudest anthropomorphizing of the soul in the entire corpus, but we may also wonder whether the whole scene, with its slightly comical undertone, is not meant to convey precisely the artificiality (and theatricality) that is unavoidable in any image of events that concern the soul separated from its earthly body. The scene drives home the realization that, no matter how hard we try, we are unable to carry out such separation if we do not adhere to a purely formal conception of the soul. When they come together, the souls are at their most human, forging a community cemented by dialogue – or, more precisely, reforging a

31 In Chapter 4.2, I dealt with the myth of Er from the perspective of the broader scheme of reincarnation. Here, my focus is quite different and concerns the way in which the myth cannot avoid personifying the souls.

32 For literature on various aspects of the myth of Er, see Chapter 4.2, notes 32–36.

community of those who know each other since, in this story, the souls are individually recognizable.

Perhaps we can detect here a certain ironic contrast with the *Phaedrus*, where the souls, ascending towards the Forms, “trample and strike one another” (248a8). Our myth presents a very different situation, which is a first step of the journey towards reincarnation, but this confirms that these souls do not lose their capacity to talk and to feel emotions at any moment of their long-term existence. This capacity is a prerequisite of the second event, the much commented-upon choice of future lives, since the souls are capable of deliberation but led astray by their experiences during previous incarnations. And if it is true that “the soul is inevitably altered by the different lives it chooses” (618b3–4), then the soul must preserve its identity throughout different lives while being changeable in its many characteristics, which include various kinds of excellence and “wealth, poverty, sickness, health, and the states intermediate to them” (618b4–6). This is probably why, even at this point, the souls are indistinguishable from human beings, and Socrates, commenting on Er’s story, does not hesitate to describe the soul’s choice as a moment when “*human being*” (ἄνθρωπος) faces the greatest danger of all” (618b7).³³

Thus, the whole myth reinforces the impression of continuity while revealing nothing about the nature of the soul that would underlie its changes. This continuity is interrupted only partially, and that by the third remarkable event: before entering the chosen kind of body, the soul is forced to drink the water that induces forgetfulness (621a6–7). This dramatic artifice explains why the soul cannot recollect its previous lives, but the very need for this contrivance reaffirms the soul’s strong temporal identity. Even when separated from their earthly bodies, souls use their memories of past events to deliberate about their future incarnation, an act that brings them closer to persons as understood in modern philosophy after Locke. This proximity does not contradict the image of the divided soul in Book ix since the dramatic device of the myth (great many souls choosing their future lives) presents us with the outcome of the deliberation and thus leaves aside but does not deny the soul’s internal complexity. In this respect, the myth does not contradict the Glaucus image from Book x either since, in the previously quoted lines 611e1–612a6, Socrates does *not* conclude that the soul, once extricated from its troubling “immersion” in the “sea” of bodies, is

33 Besides other authors listed in Chapter 4.2. note 32, Larivée 2012 offers a perceptive analysis of the myth of Er and the choice of life, which also connects line 618b7 with not only *Phaedo* 114d6, but also *Apology* 38a5–6 (see 238 n. 10).

simple (μονοειδής). Even at this point, he prefers to leave the question of the soul's own simplicity or complexity undecided.³⁴

One result of this situation is the uncertainty about the relation between the soul, as described and visualized in the dialogues, and the person in the modern, Lockean sense of the term. Of course, this uncertainty reflects the preoccupations of modern readers, but their worry is unescapable since modern personhood is deeply ingrained in our (not only) philosophical habits. Indeed, some interpreters use the term "person" as an almost self-evident substitute for the soul in the context of its incarnate existence. This recourse to the notion of person seems motivated precisely by the intention to overcome some implications of the soul's internal division and the threat that this division would pose to a more fundamental unity of the soul as agent.

I do not believe that we can reach a conclusion that would settle the matter once and for all. It is significant, if not symptomatic, that the debate on this issue has been so extensive, which is also why it cannot be properly evaluated in the brief remarks that constitute the next and final section of this chapter. Still, both the possible proximity of the soul to "person" and Plato's strategy of its personification need to be addressed, no matter how partly, before we move from the images of the soul to a closer look at the soul as almost, but not quite, a person.

5 The Soul's Divided Agency and Personification

"This idea, that something is part of me but not really me, not really human, is an unattractive and dangerous way of looking at myself." Thus Julia Annas in her excellent book on Platonic ethics, with a detailed description of how Plato, in the *Republic*, externalizes a part of "myself" that he presents as something that can only be controlled from the outside, like an animal. The latter can never "understand my deliberations" so that "the lowest part, or the person following it, should be enslaved to the best part, the reason."

34 This open-ended reading does not assume that Plato implies that the soul's true nature is simple. Shields 2010, 17, accepts this assumption: the image of Glaucus indicates that Plato "thinks that the account of tripartition in *Republic* iv does not reveal the soul in its truest nature (*tê(i) alêthestatê(i) phusei*)." However, nothing in the text has the form of an authoritative statement on the matter. Cf. Frede 1978, 38: "as to the exact nature of the soul we are left somehow in the dark by Plato in the *Phaedo* and also in *Republic* x."

In short, “to regard part of yourself as external to the real you, and to project onto it characteristics which you reject, is obviously to live with a profound self-division.”³⁵

Rejecting this view of agency as self-alienated and threatening the identity of “the real you”, Annas clearly prefers the view of “myself” as a rational *person* whose unity is posited as a prerequisite of moral integrity and, presumably, self-knowledge. Finding much elsewhere in Plato to support this view, she warns us not to follow those passages in which “the person isolates his ‘true self’ in his reason and then externalizes the parts other than reason as something subhuman.”³⁶ In her view, the person stands for a soul that successfully *unifies* its parts into a whole that is more natural and coherent than its visualizing by means of various loosely integrated animal shapes would suggest. This means that the division of the soul in the *Republic* and some other dialogues employs images and metaphors for strictly methodological purposes: we need and indeed can distinguish between these metaphorical elements and the nature of the soul as agent, a nature that is basically akin to our understanding of a unified human person. Seen in this light, fragmented agency (the view that various parts of the soul “do” different things) is an unattractive option that leaves us with only an approximate model or a metaphor that can be useful for pedagogical purposes, but cannot truly explain the behavior of human persons as guided, ideally, by the unifying virtue of moderation.³⁷

That the parts of the soul introduced in the *Republic* are metaphorical descriptions rather than true or independent agents is a view repeatedly expressed by various interpreters. It is, therefore, instructive to quote Douglas Cairns’ most direct version:

Both in the way that the personified elements of the *psuchê*, of whatever sort, draw freely on the capacities of whole persons and in the way that the whole person interacts with the various personified elements of the personality, a robust and integrated notion of personal agency underpins Plato’s account at all stages and at all levels. The only literal agent in all of this is the person. It makes no sense at all to

35 Annas 1999, 135.

36 Annas 1999, 136.

37 Cf. *Republic* IV, 432a3–6: moderation “makes the weakest, the strongest, and those in between – whether in regard to reason, physical strength, numbers, wealth, or anything else – all sing the same song together.” This, says Socrates, is true of both the city and the individual.

attempt to get behind Plato's imagery and ask what the *thumoeidês* or the *epithumêtikon* can 'really' do; it is only in so far as they are personified that they can 'do' anything. The tripartite soul is irreducibly metaphorical. The only purpose of this portrayal of the three elements of the *psuchê* as agents is to model the behaviour of persons.

CAIRNS 2017, 233

This is a firm statement: the model of the tripartite soul cannot replace the explanation in terms of the true agency of a person, not even in the sense that the intellect would be the true agent in relation to the soul's lower parts: the person is a unity that is over and above all the soul-parts.³⁸ Such a reading was also described as "deflationary" and opposed to the "realist" reading that considers the soul-parts to be irreducible in pursuing their own agendas.³⁹ I cannot discuss the various nuanced modalities of these positions in recent literature, but it is clear that the reading that considers the soul-parts to be only metaphorical agents tends to consider the soul's agency to be equivalent to the agency of a person in the broad sense of a human being. In sum, while avoiding to strongly personify the *parts* of the soul, this reading projects onto the *whole* soul the unity of a person. If so, then the avoidance of strong personification of the parts of the soul invites a certain metonymy, which leads us from a unified soul-agency to the agency of one person as conscious of itself in both time and space.

Against this tendency to subordinate the soul's internal division to the soul's more unified personhood, the more literal or "realist" reading does not deny that Plato uses metaphors when he speaks about the soul and the soul-parts. After all, given that the soul eludes sense perception yet is introduced as a real cause of events in the world, we *cannot* avoid speaking

38 See Cairns 2017, 232, with a criticism of Irwin 1995, 285–287, whose position is more nuanced including his suggestion that, concerning the individual, "Plato seems to intend the person to remain the permanent source of authority; every change of domination in the soul is accepted by the soul itself" (287). The person would therefore accommodate the shifting balance of power within the soul. See Whiting 2012, 202–204, for more on Irwin's position on this issue, including the "hybrid" option that would find different conceptions of tripartition (as either metaphorical or "true") in *Republic* II–IV and *Republic* VIII–IX.

39 These labels come from Whiting 2012, who demonstrates how, in various passages of the *Republic*, either one or the other of these two options seems to be easier to defend. Most importantly, Whiting makes us wonder what lesson could follow from this peculiar range of possibilities. My own remarks in this section assume that, indeed, Plato does not advance one correct "solution" that we, his modern interpreters, should finally discover.

metaphorically about it.⁴⁰ What is important, however, is that the visualizing of the soul-parts in Book IX, quite like the corresponding passages in Book VIII, is not *only* metaphorical and susceptible of being replaced by another account that would reveal the soul's nature as different from what its images convey. Even if we leave aside the complicated issue of how Book IX relates to the division of the soul in Book IV, we may thus take the above-analyzed monstrous image literally and conclude that, as Christopher Bobonich puts it, "the *Republic's* Partition Theory leaves no room for the person as an entity over and above the compound of the parts."⁴¹ Without rehearsing the detailed arguments that Bobonich offers in support of this conclusion – and keeping in mind the *mise en abyme* of the internal and external human being – we need to emphasize that, contrary to the usual criticism, such a reading does *not* discredit the soul's unified agency, but implies that its unity can only be a performative one: it is achieved through the actions of one of the soul's parts, preferably the intellect. To use the terms employed elsewhere in the *Republic*, it is a unity established in deed (*en ergō*), not in word (*en logō*).

To emphasize this kind of unity is also to acknowledge that, in any case, we can only judge the success or failure of the soul's performance by evaluating the human behavior that follows from it. So, even from this vantage point, there is a certain metaphorical dimension to the discussion of the soul. Remember: if we accept that – as Cairns claims while opposing Bobonich's reading – the soul-parts cannot properly "do" anything but are only described as such by being "personified", then the same conclusion could logically be drawn about the soul regardless of whether we take it to be

40 Cf. Schofield 2006, 280 n. 48: "I conclude that Plato – always the dramatist of the theatre of the soul – has *no* non-metaphorical way of articulating his theory of mind." It must be added that, in this note, Schofield expresses his own preference for reframing the persuasion of the lowest part of the soul in terms of "the self reasoning with itself about why it would be better not to indulge evil desires."

41 Bobonich 1994, 17. I leave aside Bobonich's detailed analyses of *Republic* IV and its relation to later books. I will add one more quotation from Bobonich later on; here it is enough to reproduce one of his summarizing statements on the soul-parts: "Plato characterizes each of these three parts in agent-like terms: each is treated as the ultimate subject of psychological affections, activities, and capacities that are normally attributed to the person as a whole" (1994, 219). A note to this statement specifies that, in the context of the *Republic*, we should "understand the claim that the parts of the soul are agent-like as the claim that psychic affections and activities stand to the parts of the soul in the same relation that we pre-reflectively think they stand in to the person who has them" (526 n. 1). My agreement with this note will be clear from my next paragraph.

tripartite or simple. This would mean that not only “soul” would become metaphorical, but also that we could quite easily reverse our interpretive perspective and claim that the modern term “person” is used here as a metaphor for the soul as understood by Plato.

This last remark is a warning against dealing too loosely with the Platonic framework, where we assume right from the beginning that the soul *is* truly something that acts as a real cause independently of the visible and tangible body. This framework, which differs from both Plato’s predecessors and Aristotle or the Stoics, makes us wonder about the puzzling relationship between soul and person. This is quite natural insofar as “soul” for Plato and “person” for his modern readers are two equally primitive notions.⁴² But we must never forget that, crucially, our understanding of the soul as a person and Plato’s personification of the soul in the philosophical text are two different things. This is precisely why Cairns can defend the view that the parts of the soul need to be textually personified (metaphorically rendered as animals) precisely because they *lack* the agency proper to persons. But Plato’s use of textual and well-crafted personifications is perhaps his answer to a simpler and more fundamental concern, namely, that the reader, even when she does not possess the modern notion of “person”, has a natural tendency to personify the soul in any case, no matter how vaguely and fleetingly. Seen in this light, his images of the soul can be read as a way of controlling this tendency and steering our mind and imagination in the desired direction.

The personification of the soul is then Plato’s answer to the problem of how to talk about the invisible and living entity that is not an abstract principle but does something to the bodies on which it acts in many different ways. As a textual strategy, personification makes the soul imaginable and its actions more intelligible in a variety of human-related contexts. Without this tool, we run the risk identified by Christopher Bobonich who not only offers a very detailed discussion of tripartition but points out “the near impossibility of imagining what it would be like to be such a compound”.⁴³

42 The understanding of “person” as a primitive concept comes from Strawson 1959, 101. Wiggins 2017 is an example of further elaboration. For a very different take on “person” in Plato, see Gerson 2003, who distinguishes between the embodied and the disembodied persons, the latter being close to the ideal of an entirely rational soul capable of knowledge as opposed to belief. On this knowledge-oriented account, the embodied person cannot achieve full personhood and is an imperfect image of the disembodied person.

43 Bobonich 1994, 254.

Plato's images of the soul's complexity are a way of solving this conundrum without erasing the real difficulty, for us, of situating the center of agency that Plato ascribes to the soul as distinct from the body and, by the same token, from the whole human being: a difficulty that cannot be solved by analyzing into further details the necessary and sufficient conditions of being a person in the Lockean or forensic sense of the term.⁴⁴

To personify the soul means, therefore, to acknowledge that we cannot specify in what *exact* sense the soul and its agency could be a person. And it is because of the emphasis on the soul's agency that, in the broad inventory of metaphors for the soul, the personifications are most prominent. In this respect, it is not so important whether they use the image of a human being or borrow the shape of any animal, including mythical beasts. The important thing is that the images that personify the soul represent, unavoidably, the soul's connection to the bodies and, through them, to other souls and the world. Not by chance, even after the modern shift from souls to persons, we still need the images of ourselves in the sense of memory-images that are a prerequisite for having a self-conscious identity in time. Neither ancient souls nor modern persons become full-blooded agents without *imagining* themselves as such. With all its logical flaws – including the acknowledged circularity between the internal and external human being – the unavoidable personification of the soul confirms that it is exceedingly difficult to ascribe the full-blooded agency to something that is entirely simple, not least because we are not sure how something absolutely simple could be properly alive.

This is possibly one of the reasons why Plato never describes even the human soul's best part, the intellect, as simple in the sense of lacking all and any internal structure. Talking about the human intellect, he either describes it as very close but not identical to what is truly incomposite (see Chapter 3.1 on the *Phaedo*) or endows it with a structure that allows for its progressively perfected regular motion (*Timaeus* 90c6–d7, cf. 47b6–c4).⁴⁵ Naturally, these basic descriptions, whether in the *Phaedo* or in the *Timaeus*, are far from capturing the whole range of activities for which the soul is responsible, especially in its capacity to animate bodies. This capacity is analyzed in the most detailed and yet very narrow way in the *Timaeus*, whose

44 Concerning the Lockean framework for talking about “persons”, Dennett 1976 is still a good introduction.

45 Here as elsewhere, I leave aside the demiurgic intellect in the *Timaeus*, a subject that would require a detailed independent development. The fundamental contributions to this issue are Menn 1992 and Menn 1995.

focus on physiology confirms that the lowest part of the soul is not a full-blooded agent in *all* of its activities and that we can think of it as maintaining the life function as a cause rather than as an agent.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in the political context of the *Republic*, even this part of the soul chooses and calculates, especially in economic matters, and it is in this context that personification steps in to make this activity intelligible or, at least, imaginable.

Personification is thus a means of creating a provisional unity that allows Plato to move from the more formal account of the soul in terms of its structure and its difference from the sensible bodies to the account of the soul as agent. Whether the text personifies the whole soul or its three parts does not change the layout of personification, and the logical objections raised against it are equally justified, starting with the already noted explanatory regress or circularity that perpetuates the original problem and creates the infamous “homunculi” (be they human or animal ones) on further levels. The point of personifying the soul in this way is therefore not epistemological; the structure of knowledge and belief as differentiated by the nature of their objects can be established without it. However, personification plays an important role in another quest for knowledge, one which intends – to quote Rachel Singpurwalla – “to encourage us to identify with some aspects of ourselves and to develop the appropriate attitude toward other aspects of ourselves. On this view, the significance of personification lies not in a theory of the mind, but rather in Plato’s larger aim of urging people toward a rational and philosophical way of life.”⁴⁷

This is not to say that personification reveals nothing about the nature of the soul. On the contrary, it reaches beyond the issue of the unitary versus the divided soul.⁴⁸ By the same token, some of the personifications are more symbolically inclined than others, especially when they recur to

46 On this distinction, see Chapter 1. It should be added that the biological underpinnings of agency are the subject of important contemporary discussions. For an accessible introduction, see Ball 2023, 335–377.

47 Singpurwalla 2010, 889, with a reference to Kamtekar 2006, who further develops this interpretation.

48 Cf. Kamtekar 2006, 171: “While Plato characterizes the soul as unitary, bipartite, or tripartite in different works, what I call ‘personification’ cuts across these distinctions and is sometimes present, sometimes absent, in unitary, bipartite, and tripartite conceptions. I consider the soul to be personified to the extent that it or each of its parts is treated as itself a subject of desires and beliefs which can originate movement and which can converse with the body or with other parts of the soul.” This is quite close to the understanding of agency in my first chapter.

mythical creatures, but this is a strategic rather than a necessary choice. In contrast, what we find at the core of various personifications of the soul is motion, often in the guise of the (sometimes impeded) impulse to move towards a desired goal. This is most explicit in the *Phaedrus* and least apparent in the soul, which *almost ceases* to be person-like as it becomes overgrown with “the shells, seaweeds, and stones” (*Republic* x, 611d5). This scale has psychological and ethical implications, but it also has undeniable cosmological undertones: the overall perfection of the soul is linked to its capacity for a harmoniously exercises, unimpeded motion.⁴⁹ It is certainly true that personifying the soul-parts allows for a content-rich evaluation of their attitudes and beliefs. But personification is also a way of vividly evoking the soul’s agency, whose proper shape cannot be grasped on the basis of the soul’s division and eludes psychological analysis in the narrower sense.⁵⁰ This may also be why there is a connection between personification and the kind of self-knowledge that cannot be obtained through a series of direct psychological observations. Although this is an admittedly speculative conclusion, one may perhaps be excused for thinking that the true brilliance of Plato’s use of personification lies in that it reinforces, *simultaneously*, self-knowledge and estrangement: it captures the situation where we are indeed close to “our” souls, but this proximity reveals the persistent gap between souls and human individuals.⁵¹

Such a situation is not one of complete estrangement. Rather, personification creates a deliberate distance that makes us aware that personhood is not just a natural given but has its own artificial dimension. In this respect, Plato’s personifications of the soul are like complex self-portraits that

49 Such a motion measures the soul’s functional unity. In this respect, as Brown 2012, 67, puts it, the soul is rather “like a speech, a ship, or a living body”. Brown’s text offers an instructive (and critical) appreciation of various attempts at explaining the divided soul’s unity.

50 Coming close to Brown 2012 (quoted in the previous note), Kamtekar 2017, 144, pays attention to the psychological issues while insisting that, on the fundamental level, “the agent-likeness of soul-parts is the basis of Plato’s characterization of virtue as psychic harmony – a condition in which not only does each part do its own work, but also all three parts share the same belief about which part should be in charge – and vice as psychic disharmony, a condition in which the non-rational parts usurp the rightful place of the reasoning part in ruling a person’s life.” Let me add that the whole Chapter 4 in Kamtekar 2017, 129–164, offers many original observations on the divided soul and agency.

51 See again the progress of self-knowledge that leads to the soul but ultimately refers to the divine in the *First Alcibiades* (see Section 1 above), and a similar reference to the divine in the comments on the image of the soul in Book IX, 589c8–d2.

cannot be reduced to our immediate sense of ourselves. This also explains why personification can be used regardless of whether we deal with embodied souls or with souls without human or animal bodies. In this chapter, we have seen how the former case was exemplified by the elaborate image of the tripartite soul in Book IX and how the latter case led to a very different personification of speaking and deliberating souls in the myth told in Book X. The distance between these personifications is important because it helps us realize that Plato does not hesitate to make the souls that are notionally without bodies look more like human persons than the souls that are within us and constitute the core of our agency.

Personification thus works in two directions, depending on the context: it reveals the intimate in the strange as well as the strange in the intimate. There is little doubt that personification connects to the limits of talk about the soul and its agency. When we focus on the latter, neither the resources available for describing the sensible world nor the truly abstract concepts can do all the work required. Hence the recourse to the images of the soul, which may not convey any strict epistemic lesson but do report something about the soul's unique power to simultaneously move, animate, and think. We already know that this power projects souls into human bodies, and thus cities, or into large-scale cosmic panoramas. Variations in degree of "personability" are then used not only with a view to one or the other of these contexts but also as a reminder that the soul, unlike a human being, passes between them. To bring this variety together, and to do so as succinctly as possible, is the task for this book's Conclusion.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this book, the souls described by Plato are individual agents to which three basic activities are clearly attributed: they move on their own, they animate bodies, and they think. What is much less clear, however, is the degree of integration of these activities. Can we ascribe them to the souls in the same way, or is one of them more primitive than the others and, as a result, a true precondition of the soul's individual actions?

Before giving an answer that would summarize the lesson of the previous chapters, we should note that the interpreters tend to emphasize the soul's activities of animating the bodies and of thinking. These activities appear as the opposite poles of the spectrum that encompasses the soul's own life, which is particularly evident in the case of the *Phaedo*. In the latter, Socrates

credits the soul with two functions: cognition and animating a body. These functions are competitive, not complementary: a soul will become wise to the extent to which it detaches itself, during life, from the body, whereas a soul that fully occupies itself with the body and its needs will not gain philosophical understanding.¹

In other words, it is the same soul that does the thinking *and* animates the body, but Plato is careful to distinguish these activities, and he implies that “intellectual activity waxes as bodily involvement wanes and *vice versa*.”²

This picture of competing activities applies not only to the *Phaedo*, where it comes to the fore, but also to other dialogues, not least because the objectives of animation and thought are neatly distinct. However, this difference

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- 1 Long 2021, 148. Cf. also Campbell 2021, 523 and 528, who argues that, for Plato, “the soul must be both the principle of motion and the subject of cognition” (523) and that “the soul moves things with its thoughts, generally speaking” (528). At the same time, according to the Platonic conception, thought itself *is* a kind of motion (see right below). The bulk of Campbell's paper discusses the soul as the source of the *ordered* motion in the universe.
 - 2 Broadie 2001, 303, with an explicit emphasis that “the soul that can function as pure intellect is the same as the soul that keeps the body alive.”

need not imply an irreconcilable duality of soul-functions. This is because the remaining of the above-listed activities, namely self-motion, is arguably the most primitive: on a closer look, Plato's accounts of both the life-bearing soul and the thinking soul imply that, in both respects, the soul is, first and foremost, a self-mover. This claim seems uncontroversial with respect to the soul's animating activity, which is identified as the nature of the self-moving soul in the *Phaedrus* 245e4–6 (see Chapter 3.4). On the whole, the dialogues are not very forthcoming about the connection between the soul and the physiology of living beings, although the *Timaeus* leaves no doubt that the lower parts of the soul are intimately interwoven with the tissues and organs of the body and that they act upon the latter while being affected by their motions in turn. How this account fits with the picture of the soul in other dialogues is far from entirely clear, but it seems reasonable to assume that the soul needs to be mobile to care for the body from within. The image of the weaver, discussed in the *Phaedo* (see Chapter 2.2), is probably a good approximation of the motions in question. What, however, about the soul's activity of thinking? Can thought be understood as motion?

Sometimes, as in the *Timaeus* and *Laws* x, this understanding cannot be explained away as only a metaphorical account: in the nature of the soul, motion and thought are tightly connected, so much so that thinking implies moving in a three-dimensional space. The *Timaeus* is also explicit about the kinship between the rotational thought of the world soul and the motions of our intellect. I have discussed this conception in Chapter 3.5, but its relevance to my more general conclusions can be further underlined by David Sedley's concise summary:

It is tempting to suppose that, inside our heads, there are no literally circular motions, and that the processes of pure thought, with their ability to dwell endlessly on knowledge of unchanging truths, are merely analogous to circular motions. But the *Timaeus* is a work on physics, and the text leaves no doubt that the motions are spatial ones in the head just as much as they are in the heaven, which the head mimics at the microcosmic level. Indeed, if the motions in our heads were not literally circular, there would be no need for our heads to be (approximately) round.³

3 Sedley 2017, 319. Cf. Sedley 1997, 329. On thinking and circular motion, see also Lee 1976, and some nuanced remarks in Campbell 2022a.

This conception is criticized in *De anima* I 3, where Aristotle raises two different objections: the association of the soul with circular motion cannot be valid for the lower parts of the soul, whose motion is not circular (407a6); but, in any case, the above-summarized account is not true about the intellect either since the latter, *pace* Plato, cannot be conceived as magnitude (407a6–22). I cannot discuss the series of Aristotle's complex counter-arguments, the core of which consists in a repeated rejection of the claim, Plato's or otherwise, that motion (and therefore self-motion) belongs to the soul. What is important for my purposes is Aristotle's confirmation that, according to Plato, all parts of the soul are in motion. *De anima* I 3 focuses its critical eye on the circular motions of the Platonic intellect, but we are told that the other soul-parts have their own motion too, only "their motion is not a local circular motion" (τούτων γὰρ ἡ κίνησις οὐ κυκλοφορία, 407a6).

This is consistent not only with the *Timaeus*, but also with the account of the tripartite self-moving soul in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates describes the intellect's pursuit of knowledge without mentioning this physico-mathematical account but still describes the grasp of the Forms as a kind of stillstand: a unique moment when the self-moving souls are *carried* by the celestial rotation, which as if replaces the circular motions of the intellect (see *Phaedrus* 247c1: στάσας δὲ αὐτὰς περιάγει ἢ περιφορά).⁴ Of course, the attempt at mathematical precision in the *Timaeus* and the highly imaginative account in the *Phaedrus* should not be forced into a single mold, but the premise of self-motion as a local motion is equally fundamental in both texts. Similarly, the wide range of Plato's descriptions of the soul extrapolates from the self-motion posited as a truly primitive notion, one that can underlie any type of the soul's activity. The important consequence – and another key difference between Plato and Aristotle – is that, in all these situations, the moving and thinking soul is of course distinct from the *content* of its thoughts: even a thinking Platonic intellect is described in a way that makes it closer to what Aristotle, whose own conception of the intellect is more rigorous, would describe as a thinking human being. This difference is due to Plato's decision to project the same soul onto an amazingly large scale of activities. What is undoubtedly unique to the dialogues is the versatility with which cosmic agents become political agents and vice versa, not

4 The quoted expression applies to the gods, but the same thing is true of every soul (more precisely, its intellect) that gains access to the heaven's outer surface. The comparison with the *Timaeus* is complicated by the silence, in the *Phaedrus*, about the status of the heavens and the celestial bodies. Since ancient times, the *Timaeus* has been evoked precisely to redeem this silence. On this issue, see, e.g., Blyth 1997, 206–209.

to mention the soul's properly epistemic activity, which is irreducible to its other roles.

At the same time, this versatility is probably why no dialogue attempts a true conceptual integration of these facets that rely on the soul's agency without offering the general definition of the latter that would reach beyond the shared assumption of the soul's self-motion. While it is clear that the soul is related to both the absolutely immutable Forms and the ever-changing realm of the senses, Plato is much more eloquent about what distinguishes Forms from sensible things than about what makes the soul ontologically independent of both. The assumption of such independence is probably easier to convey through images and personifications, not in the least because creating images and personifications is something that only a soul can do. However, images are not sufficient to replace a proper ontology of the soul – a situation that, again, does not have only negative consequences. No matter how paradoxical it may sound, it is the weak ontology of the soul that allows Plato to take the narrow but strong premise of a self-moving agent and to develop it in so many different directions. As a result, one is tempted to say that what the soul lacks in clearly defined ontology, it gains in agency: we do not know exactly what a soul is, but we are invited to imagine a breathtakingly wide range of things that it can do.

A crucial aspect of this wide range, however, is the unmistakable kinship between souls and human beings. It is true that the Platonic soul can accommodate all sorts of bodies (and Aristotle complains about this indeterminacy too, although, in *De anima* 1 3, 407b20–23, he addresses his rebuke to the Pythagoreans) or move through the universe on its own, but human shape is part of every Platonic image of the soul. The resulting situation is again ambiguous, since the soul is both a central part of the human being and its only part which survives, more or less intact, the demise of this being. In this respect, Platonic anthropology is secondary to the fact that the soul, and only the soul, makes us into agents. Ethical and political agency of human beings would not be possible without the more primitive agency of the soul. This is why Plato assigns to human beings the task of “caring” for their souls. This task is first made explicit in the *First Alcibiades*, where its possible Democritean pedigree makes way for a progressive stripping of the soul from the body that becomes its instrument before we learn that the soul's best part “resembles” the divine (132d5–133c7).⁵ I have

5 On care for the soul and Democritus, see Procopé 1989 and 1990. For a recent reappraisal of the role of Democritus in ancient ethics, see Motte 2022.

summarized this progression and its possible lesson in Chapter 5.1, but it may be added that it is yet another case of a Platonic perspective that Aristotle will develop in a new direction: in *De anima* I 3, 407b26–27, he remarks that the soul should use (χρησθαι) the body as the art uses its instruments, which agrees quite nicely with the argument of the *First Alcibiades*. However, in *De anima* I 4, 408b13–15, he denies the agency of the soul, which would act independently of bodily processes: “to say that the soul is angry is the same as to say that it weaves or builds. In the same way it is better not to say that it takes pity, learns, or thinks, but rather that it is the human being that does this through its soul (ἀλλὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον τῇ ψυχῇ).”

The dative τῇ ψυχῇ does not mean, of course, that we use our souls literally like any other instrument that would not be an integral part of what makes us human. After all, Plato does not shy away from speaking in this manner when he says, in *Theaetetus* 190c7, that we judge and make statements “with our soul” (τῇ ψυχῇ). But there is a discernible shift in the way that Aristotle emphasizes the soul-body compound and, in the immediately following lines, separates, at least conceptually, this whole compound from the intellect that he too will associate with the divine (see I 4, 408b18–30). But while doing it, Aristotle introduces a stronger divide between the soul and the intellect than what we find in Plato. As a result, Aristotle’s intellect, even the so-called “practical” intellect, can never be personified, and the same thing is true about the soul in the soul-body compound: this intellect is too far from the body and this soul is too close to it to be imagined, even for methodological reasons, as equivalent to a person. In Plato, on the other hand, the souls seem to occupy their own ontological plane, where they function as fully formed and independent individuals, as mobile causes whose being is independent of humans and other animals. As we have seen, this plane is never clearly defined, but Plato is not averse to using human life as a reservoir of images that can be refashioned to approximate what the soul does and what it suffers, even in those situations where it is literally on its own. In fact, if the resulting images remind us that the soul’s individual survival is necessary for the cosmic equilibrium (see Chapter 4), it is still true that the relations between human souls preserve their thematic privilege even in the eschatological context: the previously human souls continue to interact, whether they are fighting (as in the ascent in the *Phaedrus*) or having a peaceful conversation (as in the myth of Er in *Republic* x).

In this way, Plato is always balancing two different but interconnected viewpoints: one of projecting the cosmos into our lives and one of

projecting our lives into the cosmos. And if it is true that from a truly global cosmological viewpoint, the role of individual agency seems to diminish, our cosmic insignificance is still presented as a moral lesson *for us*, a lesson that implies, almost in spite of itself, that the soul's agency, during the time when we see it as "our" soul, is something real. This is most emphatically the case in *Laws* x, 903b–905c, where a grandiose vision of our fate is revealed to remind each one of us that "creation is not for your benefit: you exist for the sake of the universe" (903c4–5). In the latter, the laws governing the fate of each soul are firmly established, and the gods reward and punish the souls accordingly. Yet this perpetual checking does not diminish but rather confirms the souls' agency. It evaluates the behavior that follows from the soul's true capacity to change the state of affairs:

since a soul is allied with different bodies at different times, and perpetually undergoes all sorts of changes, either self-imposed or produced by some other soul (μεταβάλλει παντοίας μεταβολάς δι' ἐαυτήν ἢ δι' ἐτέραν ψυχὴν), the divine checkers-player has nothing else to do (οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἔργον) except promote a soul with a promising character to a better situation, and relegate one that is deteriorating to an inferior, as is appropriate in each case, so that they all meet the fate they deserve.

Laws x, 903d3–e1

No detail escapes the divine supervision of the universe, but the very need for such control arises because of the unpredictability of the *actions* of lower souls such as ours. The moral of the story – every soul gets what it deserves – relies on the basic premise that the perpetual changes in the innumerable souls can only be "self-imposed or produced by some other soul." All in all, it is only a soul that can properly act on a soul, and the cosmic equilibrium requires the variety of actions performed by the incarnate soul. As a result, the Athenian can summarize his lesson by saying that "all actions are a function of soul" (ἐμπύχους οὐσας τὰς πράξεις ἀπάσας, 904a6–7) and by adding that "all things that contain soul change, the cause of their change lying within themselves, and as they change they move according to the ordinance and law of destiny" (904c6–9). In other words, what the soul really cannot do is *not* act.

Even the cosmological perspective therefore confirms that agency underlies the whole spectrum of Plato's treatment of the soul. And since the premise of such an agency does not resolve the puzzle of how the incorporeal being acts on bodies, Plato invites us to imagine the soul as, all things

considered, a very special kind of body. This stratagem is difficult to avoid unless we leave aside the idea of the soul as a true individual and conceptualize the soul as, for example, a form that can exercise a causal influence only in form-matter compounds. This Aristotelian solution is part of a very different picture of the universe, one in which having a soul is a condition of being a true substance, but souls are not the omnipresent agents that take care of everything. For Plato, however, the world *is* the playground of souls, whose agency has a practical dimension since even the most intellectual activity will translate into the soul's future life in and among bodies. In this long-term perspective, every soul interacts in some way with other souls, and the mutual dialogical engagement during this human life can be seen as a special case of such an interaction. This situation is not a condition of the soul's agency, but it is crucial to the direction and sense in which that agency is exercised.

This privilege of the soul's interaction with other souls rather than with bodies may shed some additional light on Plato's strategies of personifying the soul. In Chapter 5, we saw that Plato's images of the soul (especially the detailed image of the tripartite soul in *Republic* IX) are sometimes criticized as naïve affirmations of the "homunculus" view, which presents the souls as humanlike agents sitting somewhere in our bodies. Yet Plato's deliberate and explicit use of the *image* of a human shape does not imply that the soul or its rational part is, in and of itself, humanlike. The privileged relationship between souls and human rather than animal bodies is given an independent foundation: according to the *Timaeus*, human shape allows the least obstructed exercise of the incarnated intellect, and the fact that other dialogues invite us to imagine the intellect in the human shape seems to be a reversed reflection of this situation. In this respect, Plato's personifications of the souls can be read as a philosophical metalepsis, one that enables the author to render the soul vividly (with *enargeia*) while "marking a transgression of ontological borders."⁶ Once we focus on how the vivid images of the

6 I borrow this phrase from Möllendorff 2018. Cf. the whole beginning of his entry "Metalepsis" in the digital *Oxford Classic Dictionary*: "From a functional point of view, metalepsis can be defined as the shift of a figure within a text (usually a character or a narrator) from one narrative level to another, marking a transgression of ontological borders. This procedure makes the reader or addressee aware of the fictional status of a text and ensures the maintenance of a specifically aesthetic distance, thereby counteracting any experience of immersion in the literary work." In our case, the distance is epistemological: we are warned that the soul's image does not convey its being but belongs to the dialogue's fiction about the soul, so to speak. This epistemological distance does not contradict the premise of the soul's independent, non-fictional existence.

soul convey its agency, especially where the soul is not incarnated in a human body, the soul does not appear as a homunculus but rather as our both intimate and alien double: not something that hides inside us to make us think and act, but a different (and methodologically useful) version of the capacities to reason and to act that we exercise as human persons.

Admittedly, this distinction is not always clear-cut and the dialogues include some (not easy to grasp) transitions from human persons to souls and back again. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that not even modern discussions of agency are entirely free from similar ambiguities, since if we distinguish between agency and fully naturalized causation, the former is inevitably, if inconspicuously, personified. From this perspective, the proximity between Platonic souls and persons is not a defect due to the fact that Plato presents the soul as an acting individual even in its non-incarnate state, but a symptom of the general difficulty of accessing the source of our cognitive and vital capacities. More than two millennia later, this difficulty is not diminished, even if we use the concept of “person” instead of Plato’s notions of the soul or the parts of the soul.⁷ This is a legitimate interpretative move, but it must not obscure the fundamental fact that Platonic souls, including their cosmological and also biological roles, are agents in a broader sense of “agency” that is irreducible to strictly intentional actions. These souls certainly perform some (mostly biological) actions for which it would be very difficult to find a description in terms of intentionality.⁸

In this book, I have focused on those actions that *can* be described in this way and that relate to the role of the souls in Plato’s ethics. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the ethical life of the soul, however decisive it may be, is part of a wider system, a kind of causally closed circuit, which emerges if we do not cut the dialogues into pieces but consider all their parts as belonging to the same colorful mosaic. To put it simply: the soul that brings life to a body cannot do otherwise, *but* only when it is projected into the body does it become a true agent – not in the least because what the soul

7 No overview of developments over such a long period can be complete, but Martin and Barresi 2006 is a valiant if imperfect effort with further references. To these, we can add LoLordo 2019.

8 This last sentence evokes, quite intentionally, Donald Davidson’s much-quoted essay “Agency”. See Davidson 1971, 7: “a person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he [sic] did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally.” This essay examines in much detail the difficulty of drawing the line that would neatly distinguish between “actions” and “events” (a distinction evoked in this book’s Introduction), and also the impossibility of fully characterizing agency on the basis of causation alone.

does as an embodied agent is decisive for the much longer period of its life elsewhere in the cosmos and also for its next incarnation, which, again, is not up to the individual soul. This scheme is modified in various ways (so that, in *Republic* x, the souls *can* choose their next life, whereas in the *Phaedrus* the souls are truly agent-like in their ascent to the celestial vault, and the order of their incarnation is determined by how successfully they act during the ascent) but the result always amounts to an equilibrium that *generally* presupposes the agency of the soul but remains immune to the consequences of *individual* intentions and actions.

In contrast, such intentions and actions are fundamental to the soul's incarnate life, for this is the period when the distinction between soul and person tends to become blurred. This is an inevitable consequence of Plato's decision to make the soul a truly individual agent. Thus the soul's agency remains a primitive notion that cannot be defined through some more fundamental concepts, including causation. At the same time, this kind of agency does not quite correspond to the intuitions based on human experience. Plato may invite us to imagine the soul or its rational part as human-like, but any inference from human persons and their experiences to the ontology of the soul is tenuous to say the least (Kant will express the same problem two millennia later in his "paralogisms of pure reasons"). Perhaps awareness of this fragility is one of the reasons why Plato chose to present his philosophy in dialogical form, with so many human agents entering the discussion. The dialogues are arguably the best tool for establishing the space shared by souls and persons, neither of whom is a puppet of the other. The very variety of dialogues with their different images of the soul makes us more aware that, much like the ontological status of the thinking and moving soul, the ontological status of agency is bound to retain a degree of indeterminacy. Perhaps this is not a negative conclusion. After all, this indeterminacy invites the self-cultivation of the soul that produces a desirable kind of person within a human lifetime.

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Giving souls strong individuality is one of Plato's most influential but also most controversial innovations. This book addresses such souls' agency, which is a prerequisite of their many functions not only in human life but in the universe at large. Its conclusion is that the agency proper to the soul stands apart from other Platonic causes as the only full-blooded agent whose actions and passions organize our short moral and civic life, all the while participating, thanks to the soul's immortal existence and repeated incarnation, in the maintenance of the cosmos as a home to innumerable living species. Together with treating this multitude of the soul's tasks, the book pays attention to the unavoidable personification of the soul and to the carefully constructed images that impress on the reader its complexity.

Karel Thein, Charles University in Prague, specializes in ancient philosophy and philosophy of art. His most recent monographs are *L'âme comme livre. Étude sur une image platonicienne* (2021) and *Ecphrastic Shields in Graeco-Roman Literature: The World's Forge* (2022).

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